

*Once Upon A Time In Nottoway;
A Tale Of The Wanton, The Fantastic, And The Sincere*



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Chapter 1

A Child Is Born

Once upon a time on a tree covered alpine hillside, many long years ago, there was a small serene cottage home nestled comfortably on a grassy ledge, overlooking a shallow ravine, where a crystal creek purled right through it's center. The cozy cottage was owned by the Johanson family, of whom the man was a community doctor. The wife was a humble local accountant, enjoying the rich social atmosphere found among the staff who were employees at the local central academy down the road eight kilometers away or so, with a rich social atmosphere always dominating the scene to every outsider's surprise..To most shocked observers on the outside, the social atmosphere at the central academy resembled a soap opera of one sort or another, assuming that they possessed any knowledge of it to begin with. In this environment everyone put on airs and pretended to be of a strict, elitist moral character, when in reality very few actually were.

As a matter of fact, the staff and administration at the academy pretended to celebrate personal development, since personal achievement was the sole justification for the school being located there inside this local community in the first place. An exclusive experience commenced there from inside that pleasantly tidy cottage, yanking out the truth from among the staff and betraying honest feelings of the administration toward personal progress. Which also, in turn, explained why nearly every subject taught there at that academy was masqueraded as holding opportunity, when in fact, almost none at all did, lending the scenario more toward one of a corrupted extortion intending to separate the students from their hard won financial resources.

You see, the doctor was also an investor; a real-estate investor and general speculator, and everybody all around town knew well of it. Up until now, however, most of his investments failed to

produce much of a yield. He would beget a few extra dividends from his rental properties, a few more yields from his product sells, an additional few from his second mortgage investments maybe from time to time., but such was about it. One day., all of that was to change., seemingly overnight to everyone's great shock and surprise.

On the other side of the mountain sat the small hamlet town of Goose-Lick, where the doctor purchased an abandoned auto-repair shop at a dramatic discount, which was an honest trait common to his character., and in time this shop commenced to *really* prosper. This newly found prosperity was going on for ten years now., and increased by the month, so it seemed to both his family and the surrounding community, though the kind doctor was not one to make all of his personal business intentionally known. Instead the gentle doctor was found always living true to his favorite moral saying, *never let your right hand know what your left hand is doing*.

Then one day, a really wealthy man from far away outside of this quiet hamlet dropped by. Some said he hailed from the big city of crystal glass mountains and neon lights, where the northern display high up in the midnight sky could be readily viewed on a regular basis. This wealthy man decided to offer the doctor an extraordinary amount in exchange for his rather mundane auto-repair shop. Matter of fact, the amount was more than *ten times* the value the doctor paid for the establishment, initially., but the doctor was very wise. Most of the local population claimed in smug envious condemnation, where they would have been satisfied with the deal right there as it was, so therefore, their tainted condemning conclusion was where the kind doctor suffered from the sin of greed.

The doctor saw opportunity from the out-of-state man's eagerness to own his property, however, so he worked out an agreement where in addition to the money for the investment, he would also net a ten percent royalty every month from the business profits. Should the business ever sell, then he would

reap ten percent from that transaction and all those future from the time. In addition, the new owner would bear the same sort of royalty obligations as well, as would the new one following him. In this manner, he managed to *farm the property out* rather than simply kill the goose that laid the golden egg, as the locals seemed to begrudgingly suggest where he held some unwritten moral obligation to do. Of course while the family appreciated the kind attention, the newspapers publishing a front page account of a person's new-found wealth, honestly did not appear to assist his local relationships out very much.

Ordinarily such prosperity and fortune from a neighbor generated salutations of good luck and happiness from one's coworkers, , and dear friends. Contrary to logic, it was to be observed where something strange in this close knit community occurred following the announcement of one families' personal progress in the local paper. Instead the sensations now radiating outward from the locals surrounding were *definitely not* the same anymore, so it began to feel within the Johanson household.

At work his accountant wife noticed a smug coldness suddenly emanating from her coworkers she never recalled taking notice of before. She couldn't quite explain it, but it was almost as if she, as an individual., suddenly did not exist, like she had now transformed into a ghost on the wall, she imagined. She was astounded from a realization where all reaction was, as if., she committed some vile offense of one sort or another. These were all people whom she had known for the duration of her entire life, and the feeling presently was becoming one more of heartbreak and hurt, than cheers of congratulation or salutations. Her response was to convince herself that the antagonizing atmosphere was only temporary, and to surround herself within a hard shell of self protection, until the ominous cloud passed.

The problem in this approach *was* where more than a few years had passed by now, and the negative atmosphere was still yet alive, well, and thriving. For instance, she was up for a raise in both pay and

promotion. To be promoted also meant she would receive benefits and placed on a retirement schedule; able to build a really tidy nest egg, so to speak. Her supervisor, the troll king president, also an older individual who she had known all her life, and one more who had suddenly silenced himself toward her., requested for her to step inside his personal office for a moment upon receiving her application. He only read the application as he glared down upon her from above antique spectacles somehow sliding down upon his hooked, glistening nose, and his face bearing a most sinister sneer that he unsuccessfully attempted to conceal.

“I’m reading your application here., and what I see appears to be somewhat sufficient., but I just do not see the realistic justification for any of it, to speak the truth to you here as we both presently stand in the company of one another within these four walls.”

“What do you mean? I do not understand,” she then asked in earnest.

“Well., it's like this. Sometimes we must ask ourselves what are we about around here? Do we support individuals , or are we only about our own personal gain? Are we caring and compassionate, or do we only want to add more of the nice pie into a stacked plate we already have sitting before us,” he said to her?

“What?,” she snapped in shock and surprise. “What on earth are you speaking of? Just be out with it, please!”

“Well., it's like this,” he continued to sneer. “Just what does a multimillionaire’s wife need a raise and a promotion for, if not general greed and lack of compassion for others in need?”

“Because I am in line for it and *should* put in for the job., that's why,” she snapped! “It's called, *self improvement*, for crying out loud around here! Is that not what we are *all* about here as well? Is such conviction not a sole justification for our very salary in the first place? We have the well-fare office to

attend any sort of socialist concerns, for your information here!”

“Personally,” he continued to sneer, “it's all on that note., that I am going to decline your application for the promotion. You see, a person with access to your kind of wealth does not really *need* the job anyway. You are not in need of the promotion as a job, nor the raise and extra wealth generated., so I am going to reserve it for someone who does in lieu of this revelation in your attitude concerning this matter, as it has been so presented.”

Elsewhere on the premises life continued on in such ways more illustrating the point in conclusion, that maybe...just maybe, the Johanson clan needed to simply remove themselves from their presently oppressive surroundings. True self improvement appears to generate a need for the beneficiaries to make a new life elsewhere in more cases than a few, so it appears when we make our honest observations. On top of what had already taken place, there were other surrounding examples of obvious corruption serving to reinforce that conclusion.

Then there was the local technology repair instructor, for instance, an elderly, somewhat large individual, with a flowing beard of snow white, appearing more to resemble Santa Clause than anyone else. He even dressed to play Santa Clause from time to time. The gentleman was long since retired from years of fighting wars and various conflicts, but held a casual cheerful demeanor about himself, which everyone truly enjoyed being around.

The technology instructor employed an assistant instructor, who always labored diligently by his side, offering his helpful interjections to the best of his professional ability to do so. The assistant could be most pleasant to work around, but also was very confrontational when he felt the need to be so. The quality of his work was extraordinary, however, to say the very least. This man's creative abilities allowed him to design complete computer programs and even moving, working., nay I should say, even

the most delicate of robots., some even bearing extremely realistic likenesses of the female gender and others, such as the president himself in playful jest.,in the most appealing of ways. Very few could even dare to question his personal contributions or skill here.

The assistant had a dear wife once upon a time back during those days. The wife turned very sour toward him for his long absence from home, at work. In time, she found another man who promised her the moon, the stars, and a royal serving of rainbow caviar, on a decorate' silver platter. She took him up on his offer and flew away with him on a magic carpet., to a land far, far into the beyond. In time, even the glitz that this supposed genie had to offer her, could not keep her there inside his bottle with him., so she wished herself right back upon the homemade brick door steps of her former husband's modest cottage home.

Her former husband then did the right thing, however. He told her he had fitted a new style of souped up motor onto the latest version of an old time stick sweeper, and told her the very *best thing* she could do right now would be to kick start it, then take a spin around the universe for a while. Even though she only continued to stand there all alone on his doorstep, crying in the rain, he eventually closed the door and simply ignored her from that point onward, hoping in silence where even the purest of dung would simply melt away right there in the pouring rain!

The assistant was determined to have a life in-spite of his adversity, so he takes a ride out into the surrounding countryside and finds a glittering fairy princess. In due course of time, this fairy princess eventually invites him in to abide with her inside an emerald fairy castle nestled deep within the enchanted forest somewhere; so like any true red blooded man of the saltire cloth, he did so. The two then lived happily ever after, for a delightful time, that is.

In time, however, adversity was to rear it's ugly face again. The troll king of the central academy

caught wind of the assistant's happy arrangement, from a chirping sparrow floating merrily upon a midday breeze, then dared to call him into his office for a private consultation. The end result was where the assistant exploded in anger toward the troll king, who dared to question him concerning the perceived morality of his living arrangement, and the kind troll king then terminated his employment status right there on the spot for doing so. The jilted assistant never dared return to the premises again, except when the price in his personal gain for his special expertise was very substantial for doing so. Few among those who cherished fortitude blamed him for it, and we do truly mean there were only a teeny tiny *few*, from the very bottom of our cheerful hearts.

Most, in-fact, held a great fear extending beyond all valid reasoning, for the world outside of our little hamlet here, and any evaluations failing to substantiate that invalid fear were held in strict disregard, no matter who it was holding them out to offer.

The cheerful technology instructor, who was once employed as a gallant knight fearlessly riding forward into battle, had a dear fairy wife and some nine, fair haired children born unto him. All of the children were raised up righteously inside the confines of the local cathedral; learning the golden rule, learning the sacred commandments of ten, how to behave, walk, and talk. As his dear wife labored away inside the kitchen at home and in her employment away from the house, a certain troll princess from somewhere way out in the countryside, suddenly appeared inside the literature department right there at the central academy of valid reason held in strict disregard. He was immediately enraptured by her very presence and strangely enough, she by his. While it is a fact where he was enraptured by the slim, well toned curvature of her enticing body, because as do most trolls, she did not have much to offer directly in the face; she was enraptured more by the steady flow of gold from his past retirement allowance, since well educated mannerism nor kosher personality and appearance, were much to the

ex-knight's forte.

A strange thing about this situation was that even though the same informing sparrow chirped every minute of every livelong day, the righteous troll king neglected to even *acknowledge* the situation, preferring instead, to pretend that his staff would *never* stoop to such a despicable level of conduct when asked anything about it, and even aggressively saying so publicly in words, when he felt it was in his own best interests to do so. His responsive actions now give great credibility to the statement that something to be hidden is best done so *right there in plain sight!*

Then there was the local black smith instructor, endeavoring to assail the ranks of this gilded academic establishment. He was indeed an excellent instructor, preaching the necessity of maintaining a healthy moral character, right along with the prized shop skill that he taught. He brazenly chastised others in all of their shortcomings, even to a point of proudly declaring where all of these proud folks *deserved* their misfortunes by right of their infidelities.

His intelligence level was somewhat higher than a majority of the others surrounding him at least, where such may be deduced by superficial observation. He was aware of this fact in himself, and he arrogantly reasoned where he was totally in control of all, having any future possibility for negative situations under tight, absolutely controlled wraps. He held to a deep dark secret, however, that only he knew of and the individuals thus involved, so he invalidly reasoned.

You see, he was wed to the doctors' wife's cousin, who told her of all his brazen misdeeds in the neighboring hay barn with the dizzy peroxide blond down the street, the middle of the corn field at late mid-night with the fat lady wearing the near butch, GI haircut, who owns the florist shop immediately across from the wedding cake baker and the scented candle stick maker; in the parking lot of the local tobacco ware-house jamboree during the fall farmer's day festival, with the native lady wearing the

long flowing, waist length jet black hair, and a number of other places much too risqué for making mention of here, even in these pages. According to her, there was the secretary right there inside the main office, very young, with long hair the color of freshly mined Virginia coal, dressing pleasantly and appearing to hail from one of the gypsy caravans tending to drift through this small hamlet town during the spring and fall seasons of the yearly cycle.

There were also a number of unchaste fellow instructors whom he enjoyed meeting in secluded corners, including the troll princess teaching literature, but these were all deep dark secrets no one dared not even whisper about in public nor in private, mainly from fear of arousing anger in Santa Clause or his dear wife back home in the North Pole. The sparrow tweeted dark secrets into the kind troll kings' beholding ear, and he must have investigated and listened *very* attentively, with a certain tainted eagerness tending to arouse his quiet interest, we shall deductively figure here.

When the instructor applied for an administrative position to sufficiently upgrade his professional standing and his future retirement position, even though he was way more than *merely qualified* in every way, he was denied the position consistently due to his questionable moral character; and of course, an informative note was placed directly into his personnel file to validate that fact. Such notes were not placed into his primary personnel file, mind you, but into his secondary administrative file held on all institutional personnel, reserved solely by the academy for their own exclusive administrative review, available to any other institution only by written administrative request. This asinine note was the true reason he remained only a simple black smith instructor, until the very day of his retirement, with his retirement remaining only a meager two thirds of his basic wage, without any benefits what-so-ever.

Then there was the very kind old lady employed as an office clerk at the information desk, always

being stationed right there behind the double glass front door of the school. All of the staff called her Mrs. Susie Floozy, which we were shocked to learn was, in-fact, her true name. She may have been somewhat up in age at the time, but she carried a humming motor that simply could-not-stop, even if it wanted to, bless her dear heart.

According to the talk she had taken the entire school administrative staff for a hellbenders spin, and a nice portion of the most appealing young bucks there among the student body appeared to nearly always keep her displaying a laughing, happy smile of seemingly perfect contentment. Some had even taken notice of the manner in which the honorable troll king himself suddenly perked up when Mrs. Floozy swanked on passed, him smiling toward her in some sort of silent appeal, always making time to converse with her and not ever hesitating even for a single moment, to do so in private, right there inside the administrative coordinators' office, for heaven's sake!

Some observers vary daringly went on inside a step farther, declaring she had conversed with him right there on top of the oval meeting table itself, justifying this declaration by an additional claim of strange laughing sounds and thrilling slapping noises emanating through the air vents far into the labyrinth of the building complex! She playfully called the troll king, *El Mondo*, for some reason no one among the academic staff could ever figure out, causing him to bashfully blush and smile broadly when in public, then quickly attempt to conceal it from the staff and others surrounding him. The odd name appeared to be a pet nick-name, as far as any of us could ever tell. The name sounded to all of us with a pleasant enough ring, that it should suffice to label him as such from here on out in this narrative.

To speak the honest truth about all of this gossip, Mrs. Floozy actually did bear a tantalizingly fine but firmly curved figure truly justifying all of this pleasant attention. She worked out at the local gem

on a regular basis, she was a dedicated member of the local aerobics club, the JC's, the Cuannas, the singing Goose-Lick quartet swimming committee, etc. She was also a proud member of the local PTA, but such is another story for a time later on. She bore a pleasantly persuasive personality causing one to feel compelled to offer her their very best first, then and only then, would come the offer to all of the others, that is, if she turned the original offers down. The others could only remain paused to wonder as to the real reason *why*. Usually a generous gift from her would soon follow or would be graciously offered to persuade or convince one that choosing her for the particular acknowledgment, was most certainly a perfectly divine move made in their own best interests.

Mrs Floozy had competition, however. There was another dear angel every bit as tarnished, but not nearly as firm or calculating, so therefore always failing to maintain her status position with any sort of majestic grace or debonair, as did Mrs. Susie Floozy. This lady tended to bear lose flab in places demanding exact firmness, though she was some fifteen years younger than Mrs. Floozy. Her personality could be raspy at times, seemingly at those times when it needed to be most pleasant and appealing. Because of this fact people tended to anger at her, but held that anger deep inside until the most appropriate of times, I should say.

You see, this lady, while she had flab in places needing to remain perfectly firm, she dragged a really nice caboose, tending to magnetize all of mankind throughout the entire academy administration and the surrounding hamlet neighborhood, compelling them all to over-look her flab and sometimes foul personality simply for the opportunity to leap inside that beautiful caboose, for a most pleasant ride to boast about. Here they all could exercise their pent up anger and frustration, her toward the job and her own lack of advantage, and they toward her for her unjustified hatefulness and rude antagonism.

If the wicked troll boss ever felt like complaining about her lacking in personal qualities, all she had to do was give him a timely ride in late night seclusion, around the block a time or four, deep inside that blessed carousel caboose. With this euphoric ride he was *guaranteed* to remain quite about it and everything else, since the fact was well known that his little rainbow flower waiting patiently on his return home, would simply wilt right there in her dear seat, if she ever knew the real truth.

Her name was Elizabeth, but her co-workers simply called her Broom Lizzie, since she appeared to have a doe fondness from time to time, when the bucks all seemed to turn and run in spite of her very best efforts in trying to appeal; but in fact, the claim was simply rumor and a solid truth could never be determined, yet the very true fact of her keenly attentive eye could never be held in denial!

All claims aside, however, according to old King Mondo, really early on those dreary Saturday mornings in mid December and January, deep inside mankind's corner next to the time honored wood stove, near the inside rear of old man, Nimvel Harry's, general hardware store, she could certainly smoke the he biggest and best cabana cigar he had ever seen such a hooked nosed woman do in all of his live long days, he would boastfully declare. According to him, she would puff on it like she was mad at the entire world or something, and by doing so she somehow managed to exercise all of her raw demons; the vanilla nectar flavor resulting, causing her to become every bit as mellow and calm as a glass of pure mountain spring water! Her pronounced aggressiveness almost appeared to demand dedicated satisfaction from time to time, and the only element to induce this fulfillment was the remaining nectar flavor she appeared to deeply relish, simply judging from the tarrying expression on her face at the conclusion of her blessed performance!

She earned the name, *Broom Lizzie*, in other ways too, just to be fair about it. Her poor husband, all broken down from enduring be-drudging years of work and worry so lovingly generated by the

affections of his dear wife, now being reduced into a wheel chair for life. Though he was still yet living, the poor chap might as well be dead as far as Broom Lizzie was concerned. The pain in his joints compelled him to load up on pills of every sort available at the time for only a slight sensation of relief, with true relief fleeing from his grasp like dust in the dry mid-summer wind. Sadly, he was bound for ever-more to the confines of a wheel chair. Though the pills could offer only a slight relief, they callously robbed him of his ability to jump into that carousel caboose, for gracious sake, and simply speaking, there was no help for him what-so-ever in the end.

She attempted to smoke the cigar most immediately near to him, hoping that the mere sight of the act in progress might generate a new found resolve, allowing him to jump into that blissful caboose once more again for old time's sake, if for nothing else; but the act was simply of no use to her anymore and she exhausted herself in the care and effort long, long ago. So she commenced to parade her sweet caboose all around town, at first for the simple pleasure in receiving the feeling deriving from the royal treatment, and of course, the fulfilling vanilla nectar. These days, however, she was only after a most gracious allowance in gold, wrapped solidly in social and professional advancement, all of this in-spite of her nice appealing reputation and most pleasant appearance, according to those whom she came into daily contact with.

Her dear children she had long since ignored. One now a tarnished barrister seducing her most appealing clients, only living to hex them from their gold and property endowments. Another a Priest, living to persuade the nuns and even the alter boys into the Devils' employment. Then the last, an outright herb induced purloining villain, wasting his life in a forgotten cold stone dungeon somewhere way out in nether-land. She lived to continue on as though she could care less, seldom thinking a single thought in their behalf. So it was for all of these happy qualities, that she rightfully earned her loving

local name, Broom Lizzie. Matter of fact, she even ignorantly admitted to all of these claims by readily answering to being called by her local nick-name, as if it was her honest, birth given name.

Back At The Johansen Cottage

Across the narrow two rut road on the other side of the Johansen cottage, sat the quaint home of the dear Grandparents. Beside them on the same side of the road was their son, his wife, and their two children. All of them appearing to love and enjoy the companionship of the other, readily meeting over at the home of the grandparents for all of the sacred holidays. If their adoration was not genuine, then the display being made was most definitely of a highly creative nature. On many occasions their actions suggested a sliver of possibility, that the honest flow of genuine care and concern was *mighty thin*, especially after the windfall article was published; but then, no one dared not even speak of it by word of mouth, only doing so instead with their eyes and near telepathic thought.

It was into this small hamlet that on one starlit night in spring, a child was born onto the Johanson estate. There inside the comfortable cottage home in the bedroom closest to the fireplace, was born the gentle babe. The babe was an average child, but one deemed as having a zest for new adventure, since he only smiled and laughed upon being born, the first of his kind ever seen born by the elders. Fear of new experience did not seem to hold him within it's grasp. Unlike any child ever seen born by the others, this child did not shed tears until he hungered, which did not take long following his birthing.

Time passed, the child interacted with the other children, soon forming bonds of friendship to be treasured for a life time. It was during this time that his exploration of the surrounding area came into being. In the ponds he viewed geese swimming with the ducks, coming to view them with personality and mannerism all of their own. Sometimes they reminded him of certain specific people, when he imagined the pond was his church congregation, or later on, his class at school.

He saw the chickens pecking around all over the landscape areas of the community in which he lived. These chickens bore another type of personality identifying them as individuals appearing to converse with one another, even gossip among them selves, becoming exceedingly greedy at times, due to the sudden prosperity of their neighbors.

As he made these observations he would walk through the meadows and pastures, observing the multicolored butterflies glinting from wild rose blossom to tulips as he walked along. Many of these creatures appeared to have heads of closely cut hair glancing his way, nodding merrily as they arose on a spring breeze, moving on from beside him as he passed.

In a small pasture near his home, immediately across the narrow road running passed his home, was a happy donkey after being employed as guard for the sheep. Many times this would walk near to the pasture, and the donkey would bray as though he were attempting to speak. Often when he did bray into the wind, holding his head high, a lone visitor approached from within the backdrop, or the skies began to cloud and the rains commenced to pour. It was almost as if the donkey were a keeper of knowledge unknown to the average person and a keeper of secrets in general, he would think to himself as he played about in the neighborhood beside the green pasture.

On Sunday morning he was almost always sitting in the seat of his local parish. The building was constructed in the typical grand cathedral style, but in a very conservative manner betraying a general lacking of funds with large inflows. Many times the place appeared to be in need of basic maintenance, and no one within could figure out how the funds were going to be appropriated, but somehow an anonymous figure always appeared to provide the required financing in the nick of time., every time before the rain leaked through the roof or the power went out. According the rumor, the anonymous figure was surly the troll king president of the local central academy, since he took in a salary *far*

greater than any others in the surrounding area. All of this he accomplished less than two kilometers from his small cottage farm estate.

Others claimed it was the child's father who tended to give generously, since he possessed productive investments there in the small hamlet and in many other places up and down the mountain range. There were the investments in town such as his rental homes, his storefronts, and the like. On the edge of town he had a tree farm, some open farmland scattered throughout the province, and a growing stock account in several surrounding successful engagements; *most certainly he was in need of a nice tax write off*, they all said among themselves.

On Sunday morning, the child and his family passed through the wide opened wooden doors generating a very warm radiation, where everyone loved the other, hugging one another closely as they moved up and down the congregation aisle. In the fore aisle sat the local academy president, old King Mondo himself, who would at times pretend to act as preacher in his standing, since he automatically received approval of all present without needing to request it. Before he commenced with the sermon, he always moved through the crowd shaking hands, welcoming, speaking kind words of blessing from the brilliant one above, through himself and unto all of them gathering about inside the congregation. He had a way of pinching the boy children on the nerve of their neck base as he walked by, that our child here in observation never particularly liked.

The other kids called him *Trapper Jack*, since by the time he turned five, he had already begun to master the art of trapping wild animals for meat and fir, making his own contribution to the family table. In time, the name shortened to TJ, for the frugal purpose of conserving both breath and space on the handwritten or printed page.

Two seats down sat Mrs. Susie Floozy, often arising to speak more kind words as the congregation

was being seated. She passed through the crowd, welcoming all warmly, appearing more as a local grandmother to the others than any thing else, except to the ones present who personally knew better. She often paused, paying special attention to the dear children, who would race before her with outstretched hands, begging for gifts, which she always seemed to have; such as candy, crackerjack, and dime store novelties. One time the child could recall receiving a strange powder from her, causing small pebbles to transform into large stones or multicolored rubber-like sea creatures, when dropped into a water filled aquarium or emptied pickle jar filled with water. One never knew what gift it was he would receive from good Mrs. Floozy, so it was said among the kids.

On the other side of the congregation, directly across from Mrs. Floozy, sat Broom Lizzie, always fearing being out-done by Mrs. Floozy. She would saunter in among the moving mass, forcing herself to smile, curtsying, appearing as though it were a royal pain to do so; speaking kind words of sanctified blessing as though she forced them across her hardened, dark, lavender painted lips. As she passed she carefully eyed each and every individual she chanced to encounter, as though she were in search of *something* unknown to the observant children. This observation was noticed, especially when she encountered the men of the community, and even more so if the men were new arrivals into the hamlet, but yet rumored to be blessed with an ever increasing abundance. Beyond that, she was known by the kids as being a kind lady, though somewhat flaky, who held ice cream parties frequently in her home and allowed the kids freedom like no other adult anywhere else did. *Her own kids were very fun to play with*, thought the kids in the surrounding community. Still however, she could have her unpleasant moods periodically with no justification, even while in their company.

Two seats behind Mrs. Floozy sat the technology instructor smiling broadly, appearing more like Santa Clause to the kids while he was at church. He arose, greeting the adults, but never hesitating to

show attention to the kids, always laughing, smiling, pausing to tell the kids a silly joke or make some senseless logical analysis of one sort or another, declaring aloud that kids understood more legitimate reasoning than adults.

On most Sundays his assistant would saunter in among the church congregation, being very careful to take his proper seat on the side of the congregation opposite of Santa Clause, and somewhat nearer to the front door of the building. His appearance was one of a quiet but strong, very intelligent native individual, speaking freely when encountered, but rarely venturing outside his personal area to do so. He was assertive in his opinions, but very careful to avoid Old King Mondo at all costs, even while there at church. While at church, he was polite enough to force himself to nod the word *hello* to Mondo, but very reserved in making the effort, always being very careful to avoid the necessity of doing so every time that such was possible to do, with himself still able to save face in the process.

On the left hand side of the church congregational hall, sat both of TJ's parent's, his grandparents and his brother somewhere near the center. Directly behind them sat his aunt, uncle, and their two girl children, who were every bit as rowdy, if not more so, than their male cousins. During church services the children would frequently smile at one another from behind their parent's back, as they leaned forward to stand or sing from the hymnal, causing a laughing surge to well up that could not be quelled or repressed by even the most grand of efforts, soon exploding into gleeful laughter among them all right there in the midst of the services!

At the rear of the congregational hall sat the black smith instructor. His quiet mustachioed demeanor attempted to conceal a figure underneath that even the kids were never quite certain of. He would smile broadly at the kids racing about after the services, but appearing to the kids, to only acknowledge certain adults present, while attempting to avoid acknowledging others.

On his left side sat his dear wife, appearing to the kids as though she forced herself to dress, or had in some strange sort of way, forced her bargain purchased dress to fit over her obviously growing torso. To the kids everything about her appeared to be forced, from her slightly off plumb, *proper* speech, on down to her efforts at brushing her hair, with her hair appearing as though it desired to simply tangle and give up on all life there on top of her head.

At church the kids called him Senior El Mario, the Donkey Kong man, making him laugh. The adults later on, somehow managed to pick this name up, noticeably angering him strangely enough, in a most shocking sort of way. Some certain ones done so only in private among themselves, neglecting to notice the kids within their midst; but such is a story we will refrain from discussing while we are present on church grounds.

To the rear of the right hand congregational hall, all alone seated on the very last pew, sat the dear wife of the good king, Mondo. Her elderly face appearing positively enlightened when among the crowd and congregation, but somewhat sullen and vexed when alone. Most could only marvel as to the reason *why*, when it appeared so radiantly where every possible pleasure in mortal life loomed *right there* within her firm grasp! A number made the observation, but virtually none dared make any mentioning of it, all fearing some sort of terrible retribution; since King Mondo was also very active politically, knowing well the master Sultan, who held all of the gatekeeper's keys to the entire province of Cromartie Range.

With only a mere mentioning, the great Sultan could literally *destroy* anyone whom he desired. With a single click of a computer button, any person could be bared from employment in any profession, especially one sanctioned by the ruling province, which held the very best potential for employment along with the most abundance in quality jobs. Most business enterprises, if not indeed all, were

indentured to the provincial system; so either directly or indirectly, they were led by the whims of the provincial authoritarians. The excluding power of the sub-contract, effectively purchasing entire developments before the developers even broke ground, secured the main employers from any possibility of competition arising among enterprising self-employed individuals. This prevailing fact also rendered all individual entrepreneurs, no matter what their status-quot, subjective victims to the whims of the system, and ultimately the master Sultan himself; hence indirectly, his most cherished of associations.

If all else failed, the Sultan could charge any estate he desired, with outstanding tax debt, justifying it in dozens of ways known only when the procedure was forced into court at the purloined expense of the poor victim, no matter how much it was that the victim was worth. In the end, the fight was most *certain to be won* by the condemning province, whose investment was then redeemed by a total property and financial account confiscation of all holdings and properties held in trust of the victim. The poor victim, now rendered destitute and void of his belabored estate, was left only to wonder the dark highways and byways in search of new ways to reestablish himself, but in most cases, finding none deemed as legal. Going the illegal route only led one directly onto the cold, stone floored dungeon, destined only to labor underneath chain and whip on the Sultans landed estate and those of his associates. So it was in this crass manner, where many innocents were effectively destroyed indirectly by the great Sultan and King Mondo himself.

There were numerous others as well, both known and unknown by the author, who bore a similar relationship to the Sultan, although depending on the strength of their relationship to the Sultan, could be enemies as antagonizing to one another, if not much more so, than the innocents abroad. It was because of this prevailing reality that average people tended to tread very lightly, absorbing abuse and

simply smiling about it, rather than resisting or even daring to complain. If the great Sultan was gracious enough to allow them employment and quiet lives, then they were only obliged to be contented with this fact alone, asking nothing more than what was agreed in return for their honorable skilled services rendered. It was a common place saying among the citizens of the province, that they all were to stand honorable and with pride, in service to the province first, the hamlet second, and surrounding communities; then in service to one another, with themselves and their own interests in complete sacrifice.

With great pride King Mondo stood before the congregation commencing the sermon for the day, declaring aloud with smiles and salutations;

“Good morning, dear neighbors, coworkers, friends and family. We have gathered here today to speak of our personal trials and tribulations, paying our respects to all of those present whom deserve it, those that have passed on, and of course., to the supreme Sultan above. In addition, all must plead in earnest for forgiveness, since we *all* have sinned. Sin is most surly the scourge of man-kind. Lets pause for only a fleeting moment, to pray in silence as we go along here in our way this morning.

A pause prevailed for approximately three minutes, then his voice seemed to thunder from within the silent void.

Lets begin by showing our respects to the flags. See the two flags before us, the provincial flag and the flag of the sacred cross? Lets all turn and face the flag of the cross first, saying our cherished verse. Please repeat after me..

I pledge allegiance to the cherished flag of the cross and to the Savior for whose Kingdom it stands. One Savior, crucified, risen, and coming again with life and liberty to all who believe...

...Now lets turn to face the flag of our sacred province;

I pledge allegiance to the precious flag of the iron Maltese cross, to honor and to serve, with determination, resolve and fortitude, until victory shall carry us through the conflagration, or death no less, the most ultimate of altruistic sacrifice.

A pause of approximately three minutes then prevailed...

“Ladies and gentlemen, I do want to repeat now as I do so on every Sunday morning here, that just having the privilege to live in this fine province., is an honor unto itself. I hate to beat this statement into the ground, but I honestly do feel that all of us take our great freedoms here for granted. Because of this reality, especially among our youth whom are now present, I am going to repeat those freedoms as a list that I invite all of you to write out as I speak, behold.;

Freedom of choice..

Freedom of speech..

Freedom of the written word...

Freedom of choice in employment...

Freedom of individual enterprise..

Freedom of property ownership..

Freedom to publicly criticize authority...

Freedom to peaceably assemble...

Another pause then prevailed for about a single minute.

“And dear fellow countrymen.., this list could go on and on, outlining advantages that we have in these freedoms setting us apart from the all other provinces here on emerald earth. Still there are numerous others all of us take for granted; such as the fact that we never discriminate on any basis, as such is decreed at present in our constitutional law. Please let it be said so right here, dear ladies and gentlemen now, where I feel my effort spent is sufficient in making my point. My point here in making this sermon today is there are reasons as to *why* it is that we have these cherished freedoms.

“The very first reason that we are allotted these precious freedoms is because we placed the supreme Sultan of the sky *first* in all of our undertakings; then we all endeavored to follow his commandments. In review, please allow me to read those sacred commandments to all of you, here and now at this very moment in time...

Thou shalt not steal..

Thou shalt not commit adultery..

Thou shalt not bear false witness..

Thou shalt not fornicate...

Thou shalt abstain from drunkenness.., nay I shall venture to say, even shun the very appearance of all evil itself!

Thou shalt refrain from deceitful designs...

Thou shalt honor no other lord before me...

Thou shalt make no graven image unto me..

A short momentary pause prevailed....

“Kids, all of you are commanded to honor thy father and mother, and to do so with new found pride and joy! Next time your mother instructs you to clean up your room, then you are to do so with nothing but joy in your hearts!

“My fellow neighbors and church members, now on that solemn note, lets pause for a moment. When the music sounds and the plate passes your way, you may place your request for forgiveness and those of your mortal heart's desire here into the silk covered prayer box on the alter table, following your generous contribution to the house of the supreme Sultan.”

The haunting organ music then commenced to sound, the sound played out being very reminiscent of Frederick Magle's *Origin*. King Mondo now commenced speaking with the organ song looming in the background.

“So it says in the *Lambs Book Of Alms*, suffer not your gifts unto the house, for as you freely offer thy gifts unto the house, then so shall it freely be given unto you.”

The music ceased when the plates were settled upon the alter and the last member had dropped his request into the box covered of mauve silk, then retaken his former seat.

“My fellow citizens of Cromartie Ridge, it is for these reasons that we are living the quality lives

we are today. Yes, we have had many warriors who have battled our battles for us, only to come out victorious, but the question still remains as to specifically *why* it was that they were victorious; because I can tell all of you right here and now, that it was not by their own force or intelligence, it was due to the divine hand of the great supreme Sultan himself, I tell you!”

As King Mondo spoke, TJ glanced around at a young girl of twelve, noticing her sandy blond head hanging when Mondo mentioned the virtues of honesty and the sin of covetousness. Her father was the one really qualified to hold the position of president at the central academy, and the entire province well knew of it. He had the expertise, the credentials, everything but the proper contacts. King Mondo held that sole attribute, however, and absolutely nothing else on a president's level; but look now who it was standing so proudly in the position, looming so forth right there like a righteous saint of some sort before us all.

Soon her family along with the girl herself, arose to exit the church building, doing so at their own potential future career peril. Virtually none among the congregational masses glanced up to take notice of them leaving; but I shall declare here aloud in unabashed honesty, that the purging effects of money and faith combined, can make the darkest of sheep lily white once more again, no matter what the nature of their antagonistic transgressions.

Chapter 2

A Day At School

The school building was a quiet little wooden box sitting merrily in the edge of a hard wood-stand, right beside a plowed dirt, base ball-field, on the side of the box opposite the woods. Home plate sat within fifty feet from the front door of the old school building and the porch. Class was held here within those walls, walls and rooms appearing gargantuan back then, yet much later on, seemed no larger than his own bedroom. Here it was where he joyfully interacted with all of his friends from church and the surrounding hamlet community.

During the first grade, TJ sat on the second side row to the left, and the third seat from the front. In this manner he could grasp every word spoken by the teacher. Matter of fact, he had two excellent teachers, since Mrs. Rouge, who was assistant to Mrs. Daite Blath, was every bit as helpful and encouraging as any teacher who ever stepped through the door in front of him.

The first grade division was the largest sector of the classroom, yet the second grade division, which sat to the back side of the class, seemed to have more privileges than the first grade, from the perspective of a poor first grader back then. Boy was TJ to become disappointed upon reaching the second grade, since second grade felt like the same material covered in the first grade, with about as much advantage as the first grade. What he did like about the experience there inside the wooden box, was when teachers allowed him complete liberty to go to the library and read any book of his heart's desire. All required for him to receive this granted liberty, was that he maintain an A average on all of his work. This included every subject adored with passion, as well as those hated with an equal vigor.

The really good news in all of this was that if he had a problem at school, Mrs. Blath could promptly address the problem following church services on Sunday morning, in company with his Mother and concerned Father. Mrs. Blath was actually the dear wife of old King Mondo, but while at school she preferred to be known and respected as Mrs. Blath. Most of the kids and the local adults simply called her Mrs. Blath without regard, out of ignorance and respect more than anything else, since nearly everyone there in the hamlet under the age of fifty was educated by her anyway.

He would never forget his first day at the school. His mother brought him there. He could recall walking up to the front porch of the wooden box and seeing all of his friends from church sitting right there. Three raced up immediately upon seeing him as he walked up, Fish, CL, and Crook. All three of them hugged him, saying to him with faces glowing in radiating joy..

“Welcome to our school. We are so glad to see you here. All of us are going to have a good time. We are reading a really fun story and we have found a place right here, reminding us of this faraway land we are reading about in literature class.”

“Wow, I cannot wait,” TJ replied with great joy! “I cannot wait to go to this new land.”

“Well here,” said CL, “we must get passed the wicked witch, who if she catches us, will be certain to eat us all up.”

Instantly TJ's eyes fell upon a local girl who also attended his church, Donna Bonita. To him in all honesty, she did not look anything like a witch at all. In fact, he thought must be the most beautiful girl he had ever laid eyes on. She seized up an old clothes basket sitting on the front porch of the school building for a while, raising the open end up, running toward the boys with a high pitched, charging yell.

“Come here, my little chickadees,” she pretended to snarl. “You are all mine now, all mine and can

never belong to any body else!”

She raced up toward TJ, slamming the open end of the clothes basket over his head, pushing him down until he was bent all up inside the basket as it sat right there on the ground before them.

“Now , my little pretty, I am going to cook you and eat you all up!,” she pretended to snarl.

CL raced toward the clothes basket, yelling to the others;

“Come on, now, come here everybody now! Lets rescue him and run away to Xanadu Land. She will never catch us there!”

Immediately across the ball field was a huge stand of woods with an ancient live oak tree having imposing limbs which arched over, concealing what then felt to be a large tract of land underneath these massive drooping arms. Underneath those arms grew brilliantly green leafed vines holding soft lavender flowers shaped like trumpets. Vines of white jasmine and golden honey suckle covered the entire expanse within the majestic enclosure, with not only their enrapturing sight but also their sweet seductive scent, which seemed to float about on the gentle breeze everywhere underneath the limbs, and even outside of the limbs to a limited extent. The vines were so thick they all hung down like the curtain on a stage, blocking view of the inside from all those on the outside, who dared to try and peek.

On the inside of the enclosed expanse grew two or three narrow persimmon trees, producing fruit in late summer and fall of the year. There were even an abundance of huckleberry bushes producing huge clusters of berries during mid-summer and early fall, giving competition among the children with the persimmons. Some small yaupon bushes grew about among the berries and the fruit. These leaves the boys knew produced outstanding smoking material for use inside an acorn hull pipe, especially when mixed with the leaves of jasmine and good dried corn silk. The strange thing was that these fruits grew no where else, anywhere nearby, as far as any of the kids or even most of the adults knew anything

about. Quickly as soon as the boys made their way into the woods, they vanished into the thick veil cover created by the hanging vines. There they all sat scattered within this cover, freezing motionless, remaining perfectly quiet as the girl walked into the woods.

“I know that you are all here, my little pretties,” she said as she walked, glancing to the left and the right. Soon she spotted the area enclosed by the limbs. “So I now see that all of you think you can hide from little ole me, do you? Oh..by the sweet stars and the gentle sea, I can do what it is that all of you never knew.” She crept up silently, slipping into the vine veil, “as you hide here so quietly in your sweet Xanadu!,” she screamed, racing inside upon the boys, who yelled out of sheer shock and surprise.

All of them screamed in both ecstatic joy and abrupt surprise, racing from the girl as she chased them again with the clothes basket, only to catch up with the boys, rolling around upon the lush ground, all of them enveloped in bubbly laughing joy. Soon they settled down to view the area underneath the veil of vines. To them the area seemed huge underneath the massive arching limbs of this sheltering oak, appearing to sweep the very ground beneath them. A crow landed immediately above them, sitting upon the uppermost point inside the veil, still yet high above their heads so it felt to them. He glanced down as they played about, settling into a quiet curious observation. Donna pointed with her right index finger, directing the bird to the others.

“You see, I put a spell on the last boy I did not like,” she whispered. “I turned him into a crow.”

The crow made a call, sitting in motionless observation.

“He is speaking to us,” she said.

“Well what is he saying?,” asked TJ.

“He says, hello, I see all of you down there. I remember all of you.”

The crow moved his head from side to side, then made another call of a raspy tone.

“What is he saying now?,” asked CL.

“He says we are soon to have company. Lets sit still and see who it is walking up,” Donna whispered.

Soon a bush broke from outside of the veil. Vines rustled close to the ground and a fat brown bunny slowly moved passed the group of kids.

“Who was he?,” asked CL.

“He was a boy I once knew who loved to listen in on everyone's secret talk, then he would break out into a run, if he thought he was about to get caught at it.”

“Wow,” gasped Fish! “I wanna be a rabbit. Rabbits have fun, running around, playing all the time.”

“Yeah, but their lives are not all fun and games. Look who's following in close behind the bunny.” She pointed toward the bush from which the rabbit appeared. Silently eased a black cat with a white throat, walking in the exact steps of the bunny, who disappeared into the foliage ahead of the group now.

“Who is that?,” asked Fish.

“I think it is Miss Broom Lizzy. Sometimes she will make me angry. If she does not turn herself into a cat, I might do so for her. I had much rather turn her into a pregnant female dog, though, right now, however. Sometimes, the way she acts makes me feel like doing this. I know it is so bad of me to feel this way.”

All of the kids in the group broke into a muffled laughter at the thought.

“That picture would suit her about right at this time, I must agree as well” snickered TJ.

“We could turn all of them at church into something funny suiting them all very well,” laughed CL.

“Except Miss Floozy, she could be our pixie sprite, following us around and giving all of us good instruction and advice,” said Donna.

“What about Miss Blath?,” asked Crook. “What could we turn her into?”

“She reminds me of a bird, maybe a blue jay, with the way she chirps at us all of the time,” laughed Fish.

“I was thinking more of a flower. I don't know what kind. I don't know, but lets look around. There are some flowers on the other side of the oak here,” replied Donna with a smile and a pause as she placed her hands upon her hips.

As the two made their way around the huge ridged trunk of the ancient oak tree, they found a small patch of tulips and petunias, with an iris of lavender standing alone in the exact center of the patch. The iris appeared to reign in majesty above the other flowers by a whole foot or more, dominating the scene.

“There she is is,” pointed Donna as she cried in joy at her discovery. “There is Miss Blath! An iris ruling a class room filled with other flowers. There she is!”

All of the others raced from around the tree to behold the marvelous sight appearing to leap out before them.

“What do you think she is teaching them?,” asked TJ.

“Why, of course she is teaching them how to stand, the proper way to address the others, what clothes to wear and how to present themselves, the proper ways to dress and the colors to present themselves in. Wouldn't you know it, there really is nothing else to be taught here in this classroom today,” replied Donna.

“What about the shamrocks by the base of the patch there? What is their purpose?,” asked CL.

“Why of course, those are the carpet and the chairs,” replied TJ.

“Don't forget the perfume everyone is wearing today,” said Fish, with a smile directed toward Donna. “They all must be taught the proper scents to display and the proper times to do it. Mrs. Blath is really big on that sort of stuff, you know. She is always telling you girls about this kind of information. She calls it *etiquette*, and tells us of far away schools teaching it and how *pristine* girls, as she calls them, were all sent there back in the past, a long time ago.”

“Yeah, they sent them there during the summer months, when the hands were working the fields and gardens to the profit of their parents' illustrious estates,” said Donna with a deep sigh.

“I wish I could have lived back in those days. I would have been really rich and had lots of hands, and a caring door butler as well,” said CL, with a twinkle of sudden excitement lingering in his eye.

“She showed us clear pictures of those grand estates back in the past. The mansions with the really big columns looking more like the Parthenon in Athens, or something, than only houses; the really big flower gardens with ponds all surrounded by statues of the Greek gods, dutiful servants tending the gardens and the house servants tending the mansion interior. It must have been wonderful to have lived back then,” said TJ with a sign.

“What happened to all of the mansions and the pretty gardens?,” asked CL. “Did we have those around here?”

“Well, according to what Mrs. Blath told us, there was a big war. The Sultan king of all the provinces decided he wanted the money made by the estates in the enterprising provinces all for himself. So he sent his army of knights in to force the people to give him all of their money. A really bad war started because of it, since people who owned these estates refused to hand their money over. The Sultan told all of the servants if they would help him and his army fight, that he would personally give them plenty

of land stolen from the estate owners, and all of the people's secret riches stored away on it that they could find. So for this reason the servants took sides with the Sultan and his huge army of knighted thieves,” Donna informed them.

“Who won the war?,” asked Fish with a puzzled look on his face.

“Unfortunately the Sultan and his army of thieves,” said Donna with a sad look on her face. “Such is the reason no grand estates stand now, cause from that point on, all of our grandparents and parents were forced to hand over half of their money, or even more that we earn from working, to the greedy Sultan and his army of mean thieves.”

“Well I am going to have a great estate anyway, when I get grown,” snapped CL. “I’ll leave and go to another kingdom then, if this one will not let me have it! The Sultan can take a hike on a long road, or go down to the grand poo-pa below, for all I care!”

All of them laughed for a short spell.

“That explains all of these ruins I find around here, where nothing but columns are standing, with the whole place covered in honey suckle vines and wild sweet potato,” said Fish with a surprised look on his face. “Tell me more about what happened,” asked Fish to Donna.

“Well, you know, Mrs. Blath told us all about it in class not too long ago. I asked my grandfather about it, and he said that it was all true,” replied Donna with her eye brows raised.

“What was true?,” asked Fish.

“Mrs. Blath said the servants took sides against the owners of the luxurious estates, and the great Sultan lording over every province promised them land, and all of the riches they could find or steal. He offered them the freedom to run all over the estates, abusing the owners and their families as much as they felt like doing. The servants helped them attack the owners of the estates, burning, stealing,

hurting innocent people, while the Sultan and his army of thieves simply looked the other way. Once he felt like he had robbed the people of all their wealth and destroyed their peaceful lives of luxury and plenty, then he and his villainous men passed on through, leaving the innocent only to starve and die among the smoldering ruins and fields,” Donna continued.

“What happened to the servants?,” asked CL.

“Grandfather told me that all of them were chased down the mountain range and out toward the sea,” said Donna. “Many of them were hanged because of what they did, and the outrageous crimes they had committed. Grandfather said a mighty, avenging army of ghosts moved against them in the near future from that time of the war, attacking late one Christmas night to avenge their spilled blood, intending to restore honor in the name of those whom were once innocent victims of the knighted thieves and traitorous servants. They then disappeared upon soundly defeating all of them. According to grandfather, the ghosts were spirits of those valiant warrior innocents fallen in battle against the thieving knights, conjured up by the grand warlock, *Corvus Rex*, reigning by casting death spells from the old stony hill fort high up on Mason Devil's mountain.

“And you know something else? Grandpa said the servants never received their promises of land or gifts from the Sultan for helping him in battle, nor were they able to steal much wealth, since this sort of activity was anticipated by the innocent estate owners, and all of their true wealth was carefully hidden long before the army of thieves ever made it to the estates. That is how justice was restored at the expense of those who were unjust, according to Grandpa.”

“Wow!,” said fish as he stared outward in surprise. “I wish I were there to have seen it. I would have fought all of them off. The dirty dogs would not have stolen anything from me!”

“What did the servants look like,” asked TJ, with a slight laugh.

“Like short, dirty yellow and faded, red gargoyles with long tails. They had very sharp teeth and claws. Some of them had six fingers and toes, according to Grandpa,” said Donna, “and they were really mean and had nasty tempers. I also heard they liked to live off of people's blood, and could go about it in ways where the people were forced to allow them to draw it. According to Grandpa, some people were leeched bone dry because of it.”

“Where are they at now?,” asked TJ. “I hope that none of them are around here anywhere.”

“Well, I told you,” sighed Donna, “they were ran down the mountain and on outward toward the sea. So I have been told, many of them still live out toward the sea.”

“Well, I am never leaving Goose-lick hamlet here. This is home and where I am going to stay for ever and ever!,” yelled CL, filled with pride and excitement.

“Me too!,” replied Fish.

“Me too, but I don't know, probably!,” hesitated TJ in making his reply, yet still smiling with joy in his voice.

Donna preferred to simply remain quiet, suddenly laughing out loud, telling the others it was about time for class to begin. All of them raced back toward the old wooden box of a school building, yelling with joy as they did so.

The group arrived back at the porch on the wooden box where they went to class. As they crossed the threshold enveloped in cheerful conversation, Mrs. Rouge and Mrs. Blath were inside taking an account of the kids as they entered.

“Come on inside. Come on inside, please get quiet and be very quick about it,” both of them yelled to the kids as they entered. “Come on inside and lets quickly get seated, class, because today we have lots to talk about.”

“What are we going to talk about?,” several of the students inquired.

“Today we are going to speak about the history of the province and how it is we have such a gracious amount of freedom and liberty. No other province anywhere has been blessed such as ours' here, and we are going to talk about it today. So lets all settle down and listen to everything being said today, so we may learn what it means to live in Cromartie Ridge here, and how wonderful it is to live in Goose-lick hamlet.”

All of the kids moved into their seats placed into rows, then quickly settled down to listen closely to the teacher as she spoke. Mrs. Blath continued on in her speaking.

“Did all of you know we were once ruled by the evil kingdom of frogs across the deep and wide lake out there? The saying once was that the sun never set on the world wide kingdom of frogs. But the frogs wanted us to work for them, giving them most of our money and food that we labored from the earth. Our forefathers rebelled against them because of this demand, refusing to give them their hard earned resources, and a really big war started because of it.”

“Well who won the war?,” asked Crook, sitting next to the front of the class.

“Why of course, we did,” snapped Mrs. Blath. “Our forefathers won.”

“Were you alive then?,” asked Crook.

“No, it happened a long, long time ago,” replied Mrs. Blath, “but we still need to talk about it for a while.”

“Well what happened?,” asked another kid next to Crook.

“Well, the evil frog king sent his agents over here to occupy this province, so they could take everybody's money and food as they earned it. They wanted to collect it up and send it back to the king and his court. After the agents arrived, they put out the order telling people they could not own

weapons, they could not even leave their local communities without written permission from an agent. They also told the people they could not speak out against the king. They could not print anything except what was approved by the frog king. Before they could buy or sell, they had only the choice of going through the agents to do it, and they had to receive a stamp showing where they had paid the same amount again in taxes, if they were buying; and half the value received, if they were selling. Anyone caught buying or selling without these stamps were sent away to the dungeon and never seen again, all the people presuming where the very worst happened to him.

Our forefathers were brave, however, so they began sneaking around, buying from undocumented sellers and selling to the same people. Prices for the goods were much higher than normal, but not as high as they were after paying the heavy taxes. They also began laying back stores of weapons they hid from these agents, so they could eventually make war on them when they became better organized inside their communities. In time they did make war on them, by organizing into platoons, attacking these frog agents, killing them, and taking their weapons. Then they could outfit more men to do more fighting. This is how they organized and fought their war.”

“What happened when it all ended?,” asked another kid near the front of the class.

“When it all ended the great army of frogs surrendered to us, then we made our demands for freedom, and told them exactly what freedoms it was we wanted.

“What freedom did we want?,” all of the kids asked.

“Here,” spoke Mrs Blath, “I’ll list them for you;

Freedom of speech...

Freedom of the press...

Freedom of lawful enterprises...

Freedom of religion....

Freedom to assemble...

Freedom of employment with due accountability..."

"What does that mean?," asked another kid from the far right hand side of the classroom.

"What that means," replied Mrs. Rouge, "is that if you are qualified for the job, then you have a right to secure that position. It also means you cannot be terminated without verifiable facts supporting the conclusion of doing so. This requirement is called *the employment security due process clause*. That is how your parents can get jobs and hold them, allowing all of you your fine comfortable lifestyles, nice toys and the good food you eat. You have freedom from discrimination too, and that means *nobody* can harass you or fire you off of your job only because they don't like the place you are from, or the way you look to them. Some people are harassed and fired from their jobs because they are too old, but it is against the law if they do."

Mrs. Rouge took a deep sigh, scanning the papers carefully with her bespectacled eyes, as she held them within her hands.

"To summarize here today with our history lesson, class. Our entire history is founded upon the rule of gold out lined in the *Lambs' Book Of Alms*, that we study every Sunday in church. Do all of you remember it?," asked Mrs. Rouge.

The entire class then replied in unison..

"Always do unto others as you would have them do unto you, because every motivation demands a response in kind, and on some level."

Both teachers then smiled a bright gleaming smile back out toward the class.

“That is so right, dear class, and *all* of you have done so very well here today! I am really proud of you all. I hereby assign the grade for class participation today, as that of an **A**! You may all go home and tell the good news to your parents.”

All of the kids respond by cheering and clapping their hands in joy to the words of the teacher, following her closing statement.

Chapter 3

The passage of time

and the big move

Time continued to march on passed, and the small wooden box of an elementary school was soon to transform into the large brick and iron bar Bastille of high school. TJ did not really wish to attend, since the neighborhood boundaries were transformed, forcing him outside of his familiar home area. He had family members who never even bothered to go, and all of them were doing well without that experience. If he was allowed to attend school in his familiar home area, then maybe the experience would not have been all that bad. Being forced to pull four years in a place one did not wish to go, did not do very much to make a person excited about going.

Luckily for him his Father had sensed his apprehension in being compelled to attend in an alien environment. In addition, because of the negative reactions from their neighbors and his mother's coworkers, because the family really managed to improve their lives financially and socially, his Father rightfully decided where it was time to relocate.

TJ did not know where it was they were going to, but he really did enjoy anticipating the new place

he would call home. He hated to leave all of his friends, but even he noticed his *friends* were not quite the same toward him as they once were. His life long friend, Fish, for instance, barely even payed him any attention. When Fish was around him he felt like a ghost in the room, sitting and observing. CL long relocated himself some forty miles or so away. Little lovely Miss Donna Bonita moved somewhere far away to live her own nefarious adventures, so he was told by a number of people there in Goose-lick who knew her family well. Her story would certainly be a very interesting one all of it's own, for another time and place. Crook was now a rising plant manager with little time for talk, or even casual conversation. All he had time for was working in the apprenticeship school right there inside the local toy factory, where his mother was a proud plant manager and supreme authority in the human resources department. He continued to ride back and forth from high school to work with his mother, carrying with him everyone's gracious blessings. The factory was called *Pondu Toys And Things*. Their motto was; even *good old saint Nick himself and his merry band of elves, cannot even make ring what we can make sing!*

The position of apprentice there is a much coveted position that only an elitist few can ever manage to acquire. TJ tried to land a position there himself once. Crook's mother *promised* to help him slide inside the network at the close knit facility, but for some reason unknown to him, he never heard from her in regard to it. When he inquired, she simply told him the company had yet to notify her of their decisions on anything regarding work. As a matter of fact she claimed, they may be closing parts of the plant down soon; so if such was the case, then there was no use in hiring to any great extent at the present time nor at any emerging era in the foreseeable future; kudos to his effort in trying, though, she commended to him.

Finally he had gotten around to asking his father where it was they were moving to. His father told

him the name. He told him the place was really good for business, having loads of opportunity simply for the taking. The original name was *Nottoway Meadows*. The place was some one hundred eighty or so kilometers from Goose-lick, but there no one knew anything about the newspaper article, and Father was certain the people would welcome all of them with wide opened arms. The place was a step up socially, since nearly everyone there was self employed and relatively well off. Father had given the entire family careful instructions not to tell anyone of their plans. In his mind, the years of negative motivations forced the type of response he was soon to give them, and that was simply to leave without saying a single word of warning to anyone. Allow them to figure out the questions of where and why for themselves, he reasoned. The very last thing he needed to do was forewarn any who might silently endeavor to do them harm.

Father already hinted around to some of his friends in *Nottoway*, that they might be moving soon. He owned a rental home there and had done so for years. Here they were, soon to move into a nice *Chattel* type home on the edge of town, that was long since payed off , and paid for itself several times over by now. The estates surrounding were attractive enough that Father purchased them long ago, hiring a man to establish a vineyard there for him on his property. The vineyard would fetch a fine royal profit, paying for itself in less than three years, according to Father's accurate calculations. At this point in his life he thought, everything was looking up and going onward much higher still.

The high school in *Nottoway* was much more conducive to an intellectual atmosphere. The place actually resembled a Parthenon of sorts, with a garden, elaborate gazebo, and a classical style of intellectual atmosphere really appealing to him, as were those ones of such grandeur in the old pictures. The gardens held custom crafted, marble statues of the Greek and Roman gods, along with several local heroes; such as *Captain Malibu Fanning, the chain slayer*, from the war with the Sultan and his grand

army of ninety thousand thieves.

According to local legend, all of them once marched headlong into the province, reasoning where they would defeat all opposition in a simple matter of days, highly underestimating the resourcefulness of Cromartie Ridge and its determined people. Captain Malibu exhausted his ammunition, but yet, still retained a huge store of powder. This army of the Sultan marched forward in several long rows through the hills and expansive wood-stands, he anticipating his ability to force a fight out into the few small open fields, where he was most certain to win. Captain Malibu detected a hint of weakness in this perceived expectation. On the thicket covering the high ground ahead of the villainous army, he positioned a scattered platoon of twelve *Libras six canon*, carefully aiming through openings in the brush, but deceitfully disguised as sawed logs. His main body of men now taking cover from the far left backside in front of the cannon, their call sign for battle, being when the guns of black iron belched fire and the roar of thunder commenced to rage.

Since Captain Malibu had no shot, he simply took heavy log chain, cramming nine foot sections into barrel of the great guns, packing all of it in with green Spanish moss gathered from the surrounding trees and soured tobacco, which he had plenty of still yet in the store house. In some cases he took the links out of the chain, somehow managed to cut them in two, grind the ends down into points, hammering them while glowing red with heat into fore-drilled nine pound stone boulders. These points then could be welded onto the chain lengths for additional weight. When the canon thundered, the links fragmented in some few cases, tearing through the columns like lead shot or better, declared some soldiers later on who observed the events as they occurred. The stones on both ends carried the chains through the columns, tearing down entire legions as they marched; or shattered, forming more flesh ripping shrapnel. The general scene was horrifying to behold, according to the history born from tales

told and passed on by those whom survived the onslaught. Blood flowed so thickly it completely covered the newly fallen leaves in the crispy fall air. Even the armor was shredded by the fire, and lay aside in bloodied heaps, soon serving as more ammunition for the cannon.

When the column retreated backward in the face of the terrible slaughter, the men in hiding opened fire with sawed down scatter guns filled with scrap iron, granite stone crushed into shot size, and remolded lead from castaway trinkets, fishing tackle and looted enemy stock piles, firing almost at point blank range to slay as many more. Although they were out numbered more than ten to one, Malibu's men nearly slaughtered the army of thieves down to the last man. So the stories go, the few remaining he and his men stripped bare, taking care to burn them with glowing wrought iron on the most pain inducing areas, then releasing them abroad to spread the news among their own about the punitive horrors witnessed and experienced resulting from their invading efforts.

According to enemy out-lander accounts, many of the survivors were then summarily executed following the release of a chosen few, some crucified out of a sheer desire for perverted sadism. Others were sacrificed to Ares, the great ancient god of war by his dozens of suspected followers, so we are told by their propaganda. Malibu could have cared less what happened to the survivors; the province was his land, the land of his people, and these villains were on it and demanding extortion. The consequential result was where they were being compelled to go back into the land from which they had originated! All was justified in pure straight forth and very simple logic.

In spite of what the enemy accounts are, here in the town of Nottoway Meadows, he is revered in a near Pantheon of demigods. The sacrifices he made in the name of individual liberty astound all observers, even to this very day. So for that reason he is still much revered with statues in private gardens, in-front of restaurants by water fountains, in public buildings and before local court houses,

and many other places too numerous to mention.

Father had already taken T.J. around on numerous walks through the school and the surrounding grounds, taking him on rides through the town and allowing him to meet the local people and their families. Matter of fact, the entire family visited a number of community events and special occasions over the course of time; the intent here being to prep the family for the forth coming move.

Finally that anticipated day arrived, and the family spent the day loading a moving van up with their accumulated valuables, riding away into the darkness of the night. The house was previously on list with the property management company Father was already using, and the manager knew of Father's desire to keep the move a classified secret. According to recycled rumor, it was well after the renter already moved in where the citizens of Goose-lick bothered to notice that the Johanson clan was gone. By that time, the family adapted well into their new surroundings, with the thoughts of Goose-lick and it's tainted citizenry now a hazy lingering, but slowly fading memory.

What was really amusing about this move much later on, was when certain individuals who seldom even dared to venture out of the small hamlet, now suddenly felt a need to invest in huge tracts of land, building lavish homes in places where it would have made much more sense just to rent. These people never even moved into their new homes or bothered to rent them out, they simply went to the trouble to build for show and tell among themselves and their associates back in Goose-lick, obviously, then allowing the house to stand empty. In nearly every case these people were those who only pretended to be friends wishing the Johansons well in the name of future accomplishment, but turning on them when the Johanson family managed to achieve true success! This observed lack of individual motivation and creativity sickened the Johanson family deeply; so for that reason, they all laughed in silence at these tales, but seldom spoke a word in regard to them even among themselves, out of a desire for better

quality conversational subject matter.

School commenced and TJ begun to enjoy the interesting people and the new surroundings. Maybe this experience was indeed what he was in need of for a while now, a new upgrade in general surroundings. Everyone was happy inside their newly acquired environment. Father continued on with his new business enterprise and his investment program, mother found work in a new academy, and received a substantial raise in doing so. Now she could retire, with her full pension being greater than if she remained in Goose-lick for thirty years, since everything fell on the last five years, as far as determining the retirement value per month. She came out a really big winner in her little contest with King Ignoramus, in the long run. All of TJ's cousins moved off into their own directions and were doing very well now, as far as anything was reported back to him or his family.

He managed to meet some new friends since the day of his move. He occasionally thought about the old ones, but the new ones held their own sort of sophisticated appeal to them. First there was *Miss Molly Folly*, who was a very fair skinned, petite sort of flaxen haired beauty, with a type of mannerism offering an appearance of being pleasantly shy and enticingly attractive. This young lady was *always* very entertaining, being filled with bubbly adventurous fun in an exhilarating sort of way, once one got to know her. She traveled with a group of relatively attractive, although somewhat plain girly-girls, that all the others surrounding them merrily referred to as the *Lollypop Platoon*.

Then there was Miss *Hazy Daisy*, so called because she walked about as though she were caught up inside a misty gloom of some sort, loving to wear dresses with carefully sown pictures of flower petals. She was accused by the older adults of being strung out on entrancing herbs, or living aloof among those around her. Most who knew her well figured she was caught up in some sort of dream-land, all of her own design, or in something else of a strange creative nature. She spoke often about carousel camel

people looking through kaleidoscope eyes. Sometimes she would see a smiling, fuchsia peach, looking glass sun high up inside a delightful marmalade sky, that would speak to her in a raspy voice of whines and wheezes, instructing her to do little things, that at times *might be somewhat debauched*, and not to do certain things that on the surface appeared perfectly harmless; or in-fact, the instruction may be in the exact opposite. At times she was instructed to do really fun things, then at other times, these instructed activities were not so fun, but they were never boring or non-entertaining.

Then there was the friend everyone simply called *Little Lord Grady*. Out of jesting fun, TJ simply called him *Shady Grady*, since he would talk a nun into leaping from her best pair of pantaloons, if he could get her to stand still and speak with him for a moment. He was truly the salesman and the negotiator of the group. He already exercised sound business potential, even though he was only in the ninth grade and barely sixteen years old. Some claimed he would sell pristine farmland out at sea, sight unseen or beach front property way out in the golden desert sands; and he probably would do so much quicker if he felt that there was a self serving motive in going to the trouble for it. All considerations, he was a warm compassionate person. He could be very down to earth and honest with people he felt closest to, and this quality was what attracted TJ into his company, besides his general gift of intelligence.

On many occasions after school he would hang around with his friends in the garden, all of them walking to the back side of the pond speaking of intellectual matters, and some far out pondering of young imaginations, unadulterated by ever looming, indenturing *responsibility*. Grady and Molly, who really were the intellectuals of the group, reasoned to gather the wine trumpet flowers from their flowing vines during the late fall when they are filled with seeds. TJ dropped on into the local general store, purchasing a small tin of nutmeg. All of them together discovered the luscious mauve flesh of the

wonderful belladonna rose, the inside of which had by then dried into a nice fragrant crisp. The combination in this blend, they mixed with the dried leaves of jasmine, then carefully packing all of it into their acorn hull pipes, bearing long hollow stems of wild rye grass growing in such abundance throughout the province. This mixture all of them would alight while packed inside their pipes and smoke lazily through their long grass stems, serving well to cool the smoke into a very pleasantly smooth mist

Daisy claimed if they only focused their eyes upon the reflective surface of the pond before them and the graceful unblemished swan gently paddling in the distance, that the trance gradually induced in combination with the herbal mixture ingested into the blood stream through the lungs, would transport them deeply into hidden immortal dimensions. These dimensions were where ancient intellectual knowledge would be made known unto all men once again, if only the spirits therein accepted their mortal presence to a degree where the invading mortals were warmly accommodated. In general, according to Daisy, the realm of their own and these exotic realms did not combine, nor did one accept the mere presence of the other, so the facts therein betrays the trial to be so anticipated. Could any of them ever be accepted to the level of accommodation? Only the revealing truth locked far away inside the a future era, would appear at the appropriately appointed time. Maybe this certain special time would come around with much more enthusiasm, when only a *shy* touch of magic mushroom is added into the herbal smoking mixture. All of them began to smile, speaking of these possibilities, while huddled into their gathering groups underneath the arbor.

Chapter 4

Again in Erewhon

The truth is, at first the only experience was basically one of an intense euphoria, only serving to make all everybody laugh uncontrollably. Often as TJ gazed into the far distance across the surface of the pond or into the rose sunset toward the point where the sky met the line of the mountainous horizon, sometimes he beheld vast cities and gargantuan monumental buildings looming forward in a manner beckoning him inward for a much deeper, esoteric metaphysical experience.

These structures appeared strangely translucent, allowing him to behold scenes of mountains, distant rivers and deep meadows far out on the other side of the metropolis. The feeling generated was one of forceful compulsion, compulsion to explore much *deeper* in search of experience beyond that of the average mortal realm, a compulsion of intense euphoria in the thrill of new experience and raw terror combined, in resemblance to a sensation conjured by one's very first forbidden wanton adventure.

He could not help but inform Daisy of these marvelous sights he beheld, and she informed him that the seraphs who were in control of this immortal dimension, were welcoming him inward into their private abode. The problem lay in making a determination as to whether the nature of these seraphs inviting him inward, were ones of positive intentions or negative motivations. Depraved seraph were master liars and deceivers, claimed Daisy, so they could very easily masquerade themselves as being lords of all positive, when in reality their true intentions were to simply offer bait and destroy.

“How is it that we may make our determination?,” he asked Daisy.

“We must allow ourselves to follow the sensation radiating backward into our hearts, from the perceived nature of the experience as it lies immediately before us,” she replied. “If the feeling is one

of seductive euphoria and unhesitatingly positive in it's overwhelming nature, and the sights before us stand as all consistently positive, then so it is where the forces in control of this realm into which we are led, may be safely deduced as positive. In that manner, so it is that we shall then move forward, but do so only with extreme caution, calculating our every move via critical deduction and *never* acting solely on base assumption, but only in lieu of superior reason and logic,” Daisy purred to the group as she blew the thick aromatic smoke into the hazy mixture of corona, tea, and herb already hanging as a blue haze in the air immediately where they stood underneath the arbor. A quick pleasing burst of breeze would hiss in the leaves of the surrounding willows, effectively removing this haze prior to her next address to the group.

“As I instruct each and every one of you, inhale the sacred herbal mixture deeply,” Daisy coached as she drew upon the stem of grass, “gaze upon the refraction of light on the surface of the water in combination with the ripple created by the gently swimming swan of the purest natural white, and allow the emanating sensation from those combinations to reign supreme, only for a single moment, while we all make the determination as to whether or not the source of this sensation is positive or negative, inviting or discouraging, or *damning* in it's imposing personality!”

For a period of nine days the tarnished trio continued on in their esoteric quest for the perfect metaphysical experience. Many times TJ would pause in the evenings prior to sunset, intentionally tempting the invitation all on his own, which Daisy has sternly warned the group never to do. According to her, spirits who ruled the metaphysical realm could exert a much more powerful force upon a single individual's intellect than they could the intellect of three mortal individuals combined. Some hateful spirits bore the power to cloud clear reasoning and the process of deductive logic, to suit their own purposes, which were to entice, entrap, extort, and compel into their own indentured service.

All of these thoughts traveled through the mind of TJ as he paused, but the magic allure of the anticipated metaphysical adventure was simply *much* too great for him to forbear.

He paused there before the pond underneath the arbor of fragrant jasmine and sweet honey suckle, facing the main classical styled building of the school, with the marble statue of Athena sitting there before it on the other side of the large pond surrounded by the flowing tears of the weeping willow. The face of dear Athena suddenly bore an expression of delightful approval, as he drew deeply upon the grass stem of the pipe. He seated himself upon the stone bench of *heavenly suspension* there inside the shade of the arbor, continuing to gaze upon the approving face of Athena as he drew the vapor of the magic herb deeply inside his breast, only to exhale the sweetest misty fumes of dried morning glory seed, belladonna sensation, and honey suckle rose'.

As the euphoria settled inward upon his mind and he gazed deeply into the reflection on the surface of the water, the sight of blood appeared, as if the water and the picture in the reflection itself, suddenly commenced to pour blood, bleeding into the translucent form of massive metropolis streets. Though his eyes still beheld the sight of the pond's reflection behind the city, still the form of the city itself loomed forward. As he gazed deeply into the streets he saw the flutter of a soaring eagles' feathers, indicating where the wind suddenly picked up. In the distance throughout the streets he heard the distinct flutter of cloth, such as the flapping of a banner in high wind, but could see no sort of flag nor behold the movement of any cloth.

He heard a voice of wind in the distance appearing near to him, yet then moving away into the beyond, sounding not as a voice riding on the wind, but as a voice which was a part of the very wind itself whisper his name. Strangely enough, the name was not the name of TJ or that of any nick-name, but of his genuine birth name. Obviously this spectrum knew amply of him, his past life, and well of

his present life. The voice continued to beckon him inward, drawing him in toward the very heart of the city, if only he would make the first step forward. Not only did the voice speak his true name, but it told him it knew of his heart's most mysterious desires, and as it spoke of those seductively shrouded innermost desires in their proper order. He perceived a sudden sharp crash of thunder immediately following the last statement of the voice on the wind.

As the thunder crashed he beheld an apparition of radiating golden coins in heaps, drenched in glinting neck chains of pearl and untainted golden bead, with amulets of emerald, ruby, and the brightest sapphires. He beheld priceless amulets of untarnished, unadulterated ivory and bezoar, all sitting inside a heavy three by four, by four foot chest of elaborately decorated teak covered by straps of wrought iron, sitting there completely exposed in the streets' midst for someone's immediate taking. He heard his name whisper again on the blustery wind. His heart began to race uncontrollably, his mouth ran dry, his mind labored to force his body not to move forward, but the power of sheer curiosity and the lust for the feel of new thrill, compelled him with ferocious intensity to simply *step* into the metropolis refection there upon the water. In spite of the fierce battle going on inside himself, he somehow still compelled himself to remain stationary.

Again he heard an astounding earth shaking crash and horrendous rumble of the thunder. He heard the wind increase in it's distant howl, then his ears beheld a ghastly voice on the wind whisper his name again, but this time the sound was more distinct. Again the voice went on to say it's source knew of his heart's most secret desires, both those of the most abandon nature as well as those of the most righteous motivations. As it spoke it's words a beautiful belly dancer appeared, as if from some unseen sheikh's entertainment chamber. As his eyes consumed her perfect, though still intangible translucent form, she began to assume the splendid figure of a fantastic Persian queen. She strode from nowhere across the

city street, coming to pause before the chest overflowing with coins of glittering gold. She gazed deeply into his astonished face, gently calling his name and motioning for him to come unto her. She then eased backward upon the gold, fully laying upon the sparkling coins, amulets, and charms inside the very chest itself, with her bared right leg hanging down delightfully across the front side of the chest. In her right hand, she seized a fist full of the golden chains and pearls, gently rubbing them from her knees upward across her inside thighs, belly, torso, and breasts, as she slowly turned his way gazing directly into his astonished eyes, whispering his name as she did so.

The near magnetic compulsion was almost more than poor TJ could resist, his heart raced, sweat poured from his throat, gulping impulsively on it's own, then downward all across his chest and stomach, feeling more as bugs crawling than flowing droplets of liquid. The desire on the deepest inside for the thrill and experience of entering deep into her immaculate flesh, only to savor the thrilling sensation of the luscious experience and his desire in anticipating the feel of immediately possessing the gold, was driving him to a point nearly impossible for him to forbear; even though his mind clearly deduced the lack of wisdom in simply moving forward into the vision, let alone in actually taking the first step forward. As the powerful force pulled upon him, he groaned as he continued to back up in resistance, his force exerted from the power of his intellectual wisdom, clashing solidly against the power of the invisible, yet very compelling spectrum seeming to stand immediately there before him, reaching outward to grasp the very threads upon his breast and forcefully pull. Inside he knew very well if he *dared* to make that first step toward the dazzling sight of the forbidden, there would exist *no* chance of *ever* turning back. He would be locked deeply inside the heavenly compelling mirage for an eternity.

An abrupt flash of brilliant light, another piercing roll of rumbling thunder and the howl of gusting

wind on the distance, once again whispered his name. Now before him he beheld a carpet of Persian styled decoration. Upon the carpet midst sat another stunning robed Sumerian maiden. Before her stood a large chalice of crystalline ruby glass and unadulterated gold, with exotic gem in trim, filled with perfect blush wine to the very brim. She slowly turned his way whispering for him to fly away with her into the perfect place of paradise dreams, to any place of his deepest heart's desires. *The wine will never run out*, the wind would whisper, *the carpet will transport you into the place of your heart's desire*, it continued to beckon unto him. *The maidens are all yours, to act out all of those secret impulsive desires of passion's most endearing allure.*

The lightening flashed again, the thunder rolled and rumbled. Then in her right hand she held an aged scroll of parchment. The voice on the wind told him the scroll consisted of all ancient knowledge, especially that lost knowledge of history, wisdom, and invention forbidden for men to know by those in power over them, if they were even aware of it at all. In that scroll contained all ancient knowledge of medicine, technology, travel, the truths of life, death, and of those most divine worlds beyond, offered freely forth unto the ancients by those *immaculate* beings who came unto earth from the vast star-lit heavens above.

From the streets before him a splendidly translucent but gradually intensifying carpet of rouge was rolled out upon the streets, toward him at his very feet, by an unseen spectrum hand. The voice on the wind beckoning him forward, the beautiful gypsy motioning him inward, toward her, her granting him permission to savor her flesh for his deepest, most covert of carnal pleasures, and to possess the gold for his secular endowment. With those gifts, his contentment in body would be assured, the wind told him, and his respect from the others who knew him, guaranteed. What more could a young heart desire than to have his respect and future success sealed?

Before his face he felt the presence of an unseen female figure and enticing lips, breathing the sweetest breath saturated by the alluring plum rose of dried belladonna. The face was close, most immediately before his own face, but yet completely intangible and imperceptible. He felt her hot breath as she spoke her powerful words into his trembling face of intense yearning and terror combined.

“You will move forward, even though you may not even be aware of the fact that you move. You shall transport your self forward by the magnetizing force within you, of your own hidden desires, both those of the most righteous and the shockingly abandon. You cannot conquer the battle against your self, neither can you lie to your own,” the intangible face informed him. “Doing so is way outside the possibility of mortal intellect,” she continued to inform him, “though you do posses the power to envision the ability and imagine the gifts in both character and possibility, that the ability to forbear may indeed hold.

“Gaze about you at present. Behold the city streets now surrounding you, the cobblestones that run beneath your very feet, look! The street runs endlessly ahead of you and likewise, endlessly behind. There is no escape for you now. Your dark carnal desires have overwhelmed you, only to draw you inward by the shear force of desire alone, no matter how much it is you may choose to lie to yourself or the world surrounding, that you would never suffer to submit! Your only option now is to move forward, to endlessly march forward on the street of well worn stone, dwelling among these translucent walls for an indiscernible period of time. There have been many more before you, so indeed you are not alone. Some managed to survive, but many more were consumed by the perverted hunger of their own lust, truly you are not alone!,” the voice of wind whispered sharply. “You, dear mortal, are not alone in your weakness to resist the compulsion before you.”

The streets seemed completely empty. There was no one, villain nor saint, to be encountered. TJ simply continued moving forward. He could do nothing more. As he walked along he observed the many empty shops and restaurants, the party clubs, and the coffee houses. Even though there was no one present, still the establishments appeared clean and well stocked, as if the population was anticipated to return. The sound of a distant wind moved from far beyond, back toward him as he slowly ambled along. Within that sound of wind he detected voices of people, the voices of multitudes and individuals, but the mingling of their sounds made their words imperceptible. The sky above seemed a strange mixture of blush and long ribbon like clouds, the two together appearing more like peach marmalade to the eyes of young TJ. The feeling prevailing, even though no figures could be detected, was where the place was inhabited, and that he was being watched by unseen eyes everywhere it was he dared to venture.

In the far distance he heard the psychedelic whine of what sounded as an electric guitar. Other than that, he could not make another determination as to what label to place the sound into. In the distance faces of rouge, apricot, mauve and blush, men, women and young girls, would suddenly appear in the air around him, only to fade as instantaneously as the sounds of an electric guitar continued to whine and change pitch. From the edge of the intangible expanse beyond, he perceived the howl of distant wind when the guitar sound suddenly ceased. Suddenly he heard the abrupt sound of piercing thunder as the electric guitar sound continued with a flash of brilliant light. The pitch of the sound rose and it fell, soon jelling into a hexing melody pulling at the youth with a newly arousing strength all of it's own. Before him now was a brilliant blaze of light and a terrific sensation of moving forward, giving a strange tunnel effect surrounding his body, and the sound *rocked* with an enticing, hexing, entrancing melody proving to be more than the youth could ever hope to resist.

The music was strange in another manner, not in it's sound, but the feelings it generated in the hearts of youth. The pull of the music was not only force of sheer strength, but that of a trans- sensual unchaste motivation, like the compelling power of a repressed veiled, impure desire radiating backward into the mind of the youth. The general feeling was one of anticipation in a secular taboo risque magical experience, allowed to flourish without limitations here inside the uninhibited world of the marvelous divine. Even though his level of fear was extraordinary, the anticipation of a possible mystical experience superseded that fear, and still by his sheer force of will he moved forward, though of that prevailing fact of fear, his mind refused to accept or submit unto.

As a result his mind deduced illogically that he was not walking forward, but moving without taking a forward step by sheer might of a robust outside force. The truth was, in-fact, that he was moving forward solely by the strong forces of his innermost desire, the sounds and sights surrounding him were simply extracting out that which was only repressed from deep within, then transforming it into a force visible according to the whim of his unconscious imagination. Still, all was well within his ability to force this power to cease in it's pull, and his body to return back into the world from which he made his exit. The desire to return simply must reign superior to those of repressed wanton knowledge and unrestrained indulgence, combined with the curious desire for an unearthly engagement.

Strangely enough, he noticed if he thought of a tune in his mind, the sound of the electric guitar would radiate back to him that same specific melody. Now he was in a really good mood in-spite of his looming fear, and the rocking sound strongly resembled the jamming session of *Zeppelins' Highway to Heaven*. The lights surrounding him appeared to pass by faster, gaining momentum until they moved passed so quickly they resembled a steady endlessly running string. Now he was moving forward into a shear tunnel of light, toward a brilliant blaze of radiating light poised at what appeared to be the end of

a bedazzling tunnel. All about within the air surrounding him he heard the rocking vibrations of the electric guitar sounds. As the guitar sound gradually began to fade, he heard haunting sounds of deep laughter, then the taunting but cheerful laughter of young girls and children. He struggled to go backward, but the more that he did so, the faster he moved forward and the more the laughing sounds gave him a feeling of being mocked from all sides. He moved faster and faster toward the brilliant blaze of light, giving him the terrifying sensation of his figure soon to be consumed, both in mortal body of flesh and eternal breath of soul.

What could he do but accept his fate, to simply *give in* to the force of the flow like a terrorized swimmer caught up in the undercurrent of a powerful river? The brilliant light became more intense, ever radiant, and brilliant, as he moved forward ever swiftly and quickly toward it. He felt as if the orb literally *hungered* for his flesh or the light of his very soul, the very force within his inner being that made him the unique individualist personality he was. As he moved forward through the tunnel of light, toward the orb appearing to behave with intelligence, he could perceive he was nearing the end of the tunnel, moving directly into the very midst of this blinding blaze! As he left the edge of the tunnel exit, only to gaze into the consuming orb before him, but then quickly shade his eyes; at the very moment of his suspension within the orb, the brilliant world of radiating light suddenly shattered into thousands of raining multicolored fragments. Each fragment bore every color known to man-kind, and even some that were not. He called these fluttering colors not known to man, those of the *immortal marmalade*. The colors that men knew, he called the mortal hues of a boring jello.

Chapter 5

TJ meets his new friends

Now he had the feeling of suspended animation, with the fragments of colors flying passed him as he seemingly moved or floated in mid-air. Once the colors all rained passed, he found himself neither floating or moving, but sitting inside a meadow of glittering bright emerald grass. The feeling was one of warm spring time, with a glowing sun of perfect peach sitting perched proudly up in the sky, the trees surrounding him seemingly were those of his familiarity, but upon closer inspection, many appeared not to be. He saw bunnies hopping about with human faces, smiling squirrels leaping from branch to branch, and heard song birds chirping seductive tunes of a type unfamiliar to him. The feeling generated was one of both the place being strangely familiar, but simultaneously, not being familiar at all, or hauntingly one of a hidden dimension that always surrounded him from the very day of his mortal birth.

The colors enveloping him were brilliantly clear, most radiating in the natural known hues of the rainbow, with some few being colors of which he was not familiar, but strangely very natural inside of his present environment. Ahead he caught sight of a rabbit pausing before a tripod supported canvas. The rabbit raised up onto his hind legs, taking hold of a paint board balanced on the left paw, and a brush in the other which he clenched skillfully between the toes. When TJ eased up on him from behind, it appeared he nearly completed a portrait of a wooded flower-space and a Papagayo sitting perched comfortably upon a blooming multicolored lily. The rabbit continued to paint, seemingly not yet taking notice of TJ standing behind him, then suddenly glancing over in his direction taking abrupt sight of him. The rabbit quickly turned around, nearly collapsing from shock and surprise. He continued holding tightly to the paint board and brush.

“Oh, oh my, me oh my! What have we here? Who, may I ask, are you, who stand there just looking over my shoulder like that? Don't you know doing so is considered ill manners? How dare you!,” the rabbit gasped from shock that instantly transformed into anger.

“My name is TJ. What ‘s yours?”

“My name is Ribbit, they all call me Ribbit, since I am a rabbit. Now all of that seems understandable, does it not?”

“Yea, I can see that,” TJ replied.

“Well, well now, what are you doing in a place like this? I have not ever seen you here before,” spoke the rabbit.

“I don’t know. I honestly just do not know,” replied TJ, “ The real question is how do I get back home from here?”

“Well now,” replied Ribbit, scratching his head, “From whence did you originate, bearing such a gross void in proper etiquette?”

“A place called Nottoway,” replied TJ. “ Nottoway Meadows was the old name. It should not be very far from here, to be honest with you.”

“Hmm, now,” replied Ribbit, as he continued to scratch his head. “To be quite honest with you, I have never heard of the place. I cannot recall grandfather ever speaking of such a place either, just to be honest about it.”

“You haven't?,” gasped TJ in shock.

“Never in all of my live long, born days,” Ribbit said. “Matter of fact, I would not even have the faintest idea as to which way to begin to tell you to go.”

“Wow,” TJ began to sob, “I guess I shall never get back home, then! I should have listened to hazy

Daisy Mae. I should not have played around like I did, and violated those stated rules of the outer dimension by trying to enter inside here all on my own.”

“Hmm, now, the outer dimension? Never heard of such,” replied the rabbit, shaking his head from side to side.

TJ continued to sob, whimpering about home, his friend Molly, his family, and his mother.

“I guess I am going to be right here forever, with the likes of you,” he sniveled.

“Well now, that is not so bad, I guess? I have a plenty of food for the likes of us both. I have plenty of shelter out inside my hollow log and the brush pile. You do not look too fat to accompany little ole me, now are ye there? See, I have etiquette, I am not above helping one in an obvious state of dire need. If you'll step just a little closer, I let you in on a secret.”

TJ eased a bit closer to him as Ribbit continued on in a whisper.

“Plenty of herb grows all around me, man. I can get you some real lotus, just like that eat by the lotus eaters. You know who I speak of, those people out on the island where Jason and his men landed, who gave him and his crew the lotus fruit, and they did not ever want to come back into the ship.”

“Wow!,” said TJ in surprise and shock. “You have some of that? That stuff must be really good!”

“Good is not the word, it is the very best! It really does strange things too a person, especially a man or a rabbit.”

“Like, what?,” inquired TJ.

“It makes my tender prunes feel as though an invisible ripple is stimulating them non-stop for about an hour, among many other very desirable sensations. One feels this sensation first, before all the others. The final and most extended sensation is one of total fulfilling contentment. There is no hunger in this world, no fear, and time seems to race passed, rather than just ease along. The sensation upon

moving is one of floating, since the feet are felt to never touch the ground,” the rabbit continued to speak in a strong whisper while glancing around watchfully.

“Wow,” replied TJ. “You just wait until I tell the others of this when ever I do make it back home from here!”

The rabbit turned briefly, continuing to paint as the boy spoke to him.

“What are you painting there?,” asked TJ.

“I am painting a large toucan here on a multicolored Iris,” replied Ribbit.

“What ever it is that you can imagine here in Nymphaion, one may manifest into reality, if one can present it clearly first.”

“Nymphaion?,” replied TJ. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“Well, we were once called Xanadu, but too many people got the name confused with too many other places meaning way too many different things. What we really needed was a name speaking more of our situation here on the ground. So they changed the title into this wonderfully descriptive name,” spoke the rabbit.

“I do not understand about the business of imagining things and them becoming reality,” replied the boy.

“Well then, just watch the painting sitting before us! See me put on the last touch here?,” asked the rabbit as he painted a dainty pointed green cap onto the toucan's head.

Upon him completing the portrait, the wind appeared to suddenly move the flowers and the iris upon where the toucan was perched. In a single astonishing breath the toucan opened his wings into a spread, suddenly taking off in flight from his perch, now circling above the head of TJ and the rabbit, soaring on into the forest depths beyond.

“Wow!,” TJ gasped, “ I cannot believe it! I simply just cannot believe it. How did you do that?”

“Here, every achievement is well within the mind's grasp, dear boy. Your hearts' desire can be reality, if you simply just follow along in the per-designated process. If you can show it you can have it, if you first only believe it, sonny!”

“I wish that I knew how to get home,” TJ said.

“Well that, I *cannot* help you with. I can help you with much, but not that at the present time,” said Ribbit.

“I wish I just knew which way to start going, and then I would just begin in that direction,” replied TJ.

Ribbit replied, “well, since the sun rises in the West and sets in the East, then we will just walk to the east from here, I suppose, just to start.”

“I thought that the sun rises in the East and sets in the West,” replied TJ. “It sure does in Nottoway.”

“I shall make a very valid guess then, that this is not Nottoway,” replied Ribbit. “and only one of us is bass backwards!”

“and it feels like this is the place, to me,” sighed TJ.

“Yes, I can sympathize, being in a strange place and all,” Ribbit replied. “I suppose I could travel with you, then, like mates on a faraway journey of sorts. I mean, somebody needs to watch over you and keep you out of harms way, do they not?”

“Why, certainly! Two heads trying to figure this puzzle out are much better than one, that much is for sure,” TJ replied.

“Well, we'll head this way,” said Ribbit, now pointing with his right index finger upon taking notice of the sun and the path it was moving in.

So the two began to move into the Eastern direction, as the sun there in Nymphaion did. The meadow appearing to be the most intensely lush green of any grass and vegetation TJ's eyes ever beheld. There in the forest scattered among the oaks and palm orchids, and the multicolored date palms menagerie, with that in itself being a strange enough phenomenon; TJ's eyes would behold trees appearing as oaks and polasanto combined, with multiple types of fruits on the trees far different from any ever seen by the boy.

“What kinds of trees are those?,” asked TJ, pointing toward the strange combo-fruited trees growing scattered about within the timber growth.

“Those have been called the trees of *latens sophia*. In other words, if one wants to know the answer to a question, then he may bite the fruit and ask it, and that answer will be revealed back to him; that is, if the great Sultan of the blue ice castle allows it. Here, the great Sultan *always* has the final say.”

The two walked up toward the tree of *latens sophia*. TJ stood about in complete awe of the multiple fruits growing, in which the very fruit itself appeared as two separate fruits combined.

“That is very strange,” sighed TJ. “Looks like two fruits all rolled up into one.”

“It is somewhat, I guess. You see, one may bite the fruit on one side, investigate the flavor, then flip it over to investigate an opposite flavor. Isn't that amazing?,” Ribbit asked.

“Yes, I should say, and very much so,” replied TJ, as he gazed upon the tree in complete awe.

“What type of flavors do they have?,” TJ inquired.

“Well, just think of a flavor and look up at the fruit.”

“Oh, strawberry ice cream!,” he snapped.

“Well now, lets see,” replied Ribbit. “Take a look at the fruit with the strawberry tinge there to it, and the dark tinge on the other side.”

TJ seized one up, biting the strawberry tinge side.

“Wow! It's simply divine! Unbelievable. This fruit tastes just like strawberry ice-cream, I should say here.”

“OK, now just flip it over, and bite it,” replied Ribbit.

TJ flipped the fruit, biting the dark side..

“Wow, this is simply amazing! If I could bring such a tree home, I would be rich I tell you! Rich over night! That fruit on the other side tasted of an absolutely perfect chocolate ice-cream!”

“Try another, if you like. There is one just ahead of you, appearing to be a peach and plum combined. What do you make of that, there sonny? Peach cobbler and plumb pudding?,” said Ribbit sarcastically.

“Let me try it,” replied TJ.

He reached outward, seizing up one of these majestic fruits with his right hand.

“I just cannot believe it! I cannot believe it! That fruits tastes of a perfect peach cobbler, I should say. Why, I do believe one could just bite the strawberry ice-cream and the peach cobbler, and have a perfect meal!”

“Now just flip it over and try the plumb pudding,” said Ribbit.

TJ did so. He flipped the fruit, and was again astonished into an amazement.

“It does taste like plum pudding, I tell you! It is simply divine. I think we have found our fortune here, my friend!”

“Well now, just calm down, just calm right on down, now.,” replied Ribbit.

“You said that I could have a flavor of my imagination's desire?,” asked TJ?

“I should say, so I have always been told,” replied Ribbit.

“Well, I have a particular flavor I am in search of here, since you mentioned it. What about the perfume box of our fairy princess, eh?” TJ inquired in a near whisper, as he quickly glanced around out of a noticeable caution.

“Hmm now, lets see,” said Ribbit. “Just try this one right there, with it's menagerie of lilacs and blush on one side, and dark brown on the other. I honestly feel such a deal might be the perfect trick.”

TJ quickly snatched the fruit up with his right hand, biting the dark brown side with a strange possessive hunger, then his face changed expression in a near instant, and he commenced gagging in the same wink, spitting all of it onto the ground before him.

“My word, man, that garbage tastes as though it might be from the nearest hill of dung! What are you trying to do, kill me or something?”

“Just flip it over, I say. Just flip it on over for the love of Nymphaion!,” cried Ribbit as he collapsed upon the grassy earth, rolling with laughter at the obvious blunder.

“I tell you, I simply cannot see how this trash would be the source of any new knowledge,” roared TJ with what now appeared to be anger. “Even so, I still like the fruit tree, and wish I could take one back home with me.”

Suddenly a whip-like blow struck him across his face from somewhere within the tree. He glanced upward, spying an angry light blue monkey eyeing him with both hands upon his hips, and a wooden rod for a walking cane in his right clinched fist as it sat upon his hips.

“Just who is it that you think that you are, there boy?” rasped the monkey toward TJ.

“What do you mean?” said TJ to the monkey.

“Here you are, a marching about upon the turf of someone else like that, and then you have the gall to just walk up and steal his fruit? How dare you there, boy! I say, there boy, where in the name of

Agamemnon are your manners at? In your boot heels or the seat of your pants? I take it you came into these parts a lookin for trouble, did ya? If you did so, then you certainly have found it!" replied the monkey.

"No, No, oh No," gasped TJ, "you've misunderstood me! I do not want any trouble, I just want to get back home. Which way do I go?"

"Well, I cannot answer that for you now. You'll have to make it to the great crystal glaze castle of cerulean and golden flame combined to find that answer."

"Who lives there?" asks TJ in astonishment.

"Who lives there, you should ask me? You mean you came all the way here from where-ever, just to ask me who lives there?" the monkey asked.

"Yes, I don't know these sorts of things. How am I supposed to know, being a foreigner and all?"

"Well on that note, since you have been so kind as to ask, then I shall tell you, right here and now. It is the great Sultan, that's who! And while we are here, rabbit there..."

"The name's Ribbit, mind you!," he interrupted.

"Well Ribbit then," the monkey continued, " you need to instruct the boy there on some manners and what it is we believe in around here, and how it is that we do things in general."

"I agree. He may need a good dose of manners, I should say," replied Ribbit. "Maybe if all else fails, then I'll just deliver them right here on the toe of my boot, directly into the seat of his pants there!"

"So as I see it. You shall pause to ask me which way it is you need to go. Well, just keep following due East. Last it was that I heard, there in the mountains to the far east, with the sea at it's back, should sit the extraordinary colossal blue ice mansion. Just the mere sight of it is so astounding and

magnificent, that one might even go as far as to simply faint. Beyond that, I really do not know what else to tell you. As you walk along, there may be gifts sitting about here and there, where you may discover answers as to what to do next, if the unseen forces surrounding you agree with offering you assistance, but such is about all I know to tell you,” replied the monkey. “I shall tell you this much too, watch yourself around here. While all appears very relaxing and pleasant, which in-fact it is so, indeed hidden eyes are a watching you there boy! You cannot go anywhere without some set of eyes knowing exactly where it is you are, at all times, sonny.”

“We both understand and thank you very much for your assistance,” quickly snapped the rabbit.

“You both are very welcome,” replied the monkey.

“I apologize for taking your fruit,” said TJ, as he and Ribbit slowly walked away.

“No problem this time, no problem, son. No problem indeed, at least not with me, presently,” replied the monkey with a broad smile as the two walked away.

Chapter 6

Onward toward the blue ice mansion

The boy and the rabbit began to walk along in an eastern direction across the grassy, tree scattered meadow, talking about life, pains of life and it's sweetest of pleasures. The rabbit laughed as the boy

spoke, abruptly assuming a serious face, clearing his throat repetitively before speaking.

“I guess that now is the proper time to inform you of our regulations here in Nymphaion,” said Ribbit.

“Yes, they might be handy to know and now is sure just as good a time as any other,” replied TJ with a sigh and a smile.

“Well, they all kind of line up kind of like this,” informed the rabbit;

“Do not lie...

Do not steal...

Do not kill....

Do not discriminate...

Do not fornicate....

Do not commit adultery...

We are a very *free* society here in Nymphaion. Here are the blood won freedoms that we hold so dear, and would rather suffer death than to ever relinquish.

We have, *freedom of the press..*

Freedom of Speech...

Freedom of individual enterprise...

Freedom of a check on employers, forcing them to validate their decisions to terminate an individual's employment status-quot. Yet employers are free to hire at their own will.

Freedom of benefits, specifically health and retirement benefits. This rule simply states where every employer must provide benefits, especially health benefits, as part of his business obligations. Doing so keeps Nymphaion a first rate place for it's people to live.”

“Wow, that sounds really nice! I wish Nottoway had rules like that,” said the boy. “I know of people who get fired from their jobs for no good reason at all, simply because a claim was made against them, and people making the claim do not even have to produce any supporting facts! That is why my Father is self employed, and the money that one receives versus being a payed an employee's ridiculously low salary. I sure do not want to labor back there in that hostile climate, and tolerate the outright sanctioned harassment from my coworkers when I get older!

“Father even told me that many businesses hire completely incompetent managers and supervisors back in Goose-lick, then bring another person in from a distant province to actually perform the work. This happens because local company officials are either his friend or family, and they don't want to fire him. These people tend to allow workers to supervise and manage themselves using a program of harassment. It all is really pathetic I tell you, since really creative, effective employees lose their jobs, having their references and resumes destroyed, while ineffective, incompetent employees are allowed to remain. Most of the businesses thrive on extorted public funds according to Father, and do not survive by their own quality production and performance.”

The rabbit cleared his throat repetitively, appearing really surprised at the boy's words, but trying hard not to comment.

“Let me continue on with our basic beliefs,” said Ribbit with a puzzled sigh. “We believe in a supreme Sultan who rules from the sky. The Sultan came down as a man once, giving us our basic living regulations that I have just given to you. At the mid-stage of the human life span, he then rose

back into the heavens to sit at the right hand of the central supreme, divine monarch of the celestial universe.

“We also have earthly Sultans who rule our provinces, with one superior Sultan residing over the entire Kingdom of provinces. Matter of fact, we are in search of the superior Sultan, *Siegfried El Pulchrea*, lord of the blue glaze castle high up in the mountains. According to our logic, the provincial Sultan gets his authority from the superior Sultan. Both of them receive their authority from the supreme Sultan of the sky, so therefore our rules given and all of those made, originate from the supreme Sultan. All of us are to only listen and obey, even to the fullest commandment, dear one.”

“Wow, what about foreigners? How are we viewed,” asked the boy.

“Well, far as you foreigners are concerned, while you are not allowed to cause anyone harm of any type, you may indulge in freedom of the heart's desire in a measure slightly *beyond* what we as provincial citizens are allowed. Most of these freedoms are of a moralistic nature, however. Some business freedoms do apply in a likewise fashion, as well as tax freedoms,” informed the rabbit to the boy.

As they walked along TJ suddenly caught sight of a small rainbow colored coffin shaped wooden box sitting neatly underneath the umbrella palm trees, with the word ***open me***, written directly on the top. He removed the top, taking note of a large colored layered cake made in green, red, yellow and white layers, with the word ***temptations*** written on top in black icing. Beside the cake was a note saying:

Good evening weary travelers,

If you are in search of the superior Sultan, keep following due east until you arrive at the chief

Priest's marble hinge, then make a direct left. Please eat the high energy cake for your rejuvenation.

Sincerely

Your Watchful Warden

TJ hesitatingly seized a part of the cake up in his right hand, glancing back toward the rabbit, who replied to him; “go ahead boy, take of it and eat.” He did so, breaking the cake in half, handing the other half to the rabbit.

“Yeah, I should say this cake was tempting enough. What do the colors have to do with temptation, I wonder?”

“Well I guess it is that the layers mean, money, wine, and blond haired white women, eh? I don't know,” replied Ribbit with a sudden laugh.

“Sounds good enough to me, but I do declare where I sure have lots more energy after eating that cake. I wish that I knew what it was in it.”

“It is all tough to say, but lets keep moving on just to see where it is that we are, if for no other reason we can think of.”

TJ replied, “I agree, because I sure am thirsty right now.”

The two kept walking along on the narrow winding cobblestone path, until they arrive at a marble stone table stand maybe waist high. On top of this stand was a note beside a golden chalice filled with blood red wine. TJ picked the note up, reading it aloud to the rabbit.

“Dear Fellow Travelers,

*You both arrived in the world at the time that you did so. You were very curious, and have thus ventured inward this far. You both carry your innermost desires deep within you. One day you will fulfill those desires, and **such** are the effects that gratification will have upon you.*

TJ seized up the chalice and quickly drank half down, offering the other half to the rabbit who finished it. Both suddenly began laughing, glancing around, speaking of the way they felt as if they were out at sea for months on end, only to now stand upon dry land. TJ glanced down upon the note once more again.

Gratulantur!

You both hath made it thus far, so now it is that you have reached the point of no return. Keep traveling due east, and ye shall soon arrive at the sacred hinge. You will soon feel the allure of real success, since you hath now reached near the midpoint in your great quest.

Sincerely

Your Ever Watchful Warden

“Wow,” said Ribbit, “guess we must walk a bit more. I’m getting just a mite tired, to tell the truth about it all.”

“This meadow, now turning into a forest, is getting kind of far and wide. All I know to do is to keep heading due East, until we get to that darned hinge. To tell the truth, what is a hinge anyway?,” asked TJ with a yawn.

“Well, it’s a stone temple with two large flat stones on either side, and two across the top. It can be an alter upon which something is held in great reverence,” replied Ribbit.

“I guess it is that we’ll just keep on walking East, with the now peach colored sun directly overhead,” TJ replied.

The two continued on for what felt as though hours had transpired. Soon they passed a purple unicorn who could peer forward into the future and backward into the past. They asked him what time it was, and were astounded only to find they both were in Nymphaion for only a matter of minutes! The unicorn claimed the effects of the herb laced wine were to quicken the passage of time. He refused to speak information regarding a way out, avoiding passage through the blue ice Bastille mansion and passed the Grand Sultan. According to him, the Sultan requested in earnest that they visit him, and this request would be honored dutifully. As they continued to walk along, they perceived speech from a small, but harsh voice from within the thick brush beside them.

“Keep your toes to the Eastward, thus shall your mind then wonder least,” the voice said.

Ahead he heard another voice speak the same words, the source only continuing to remain hidden. Then another voice replied;

“Otherwise your body shall become permanently lost, and your dear families shall surly pay the cost.”

“Where are you?,” asked TJ aloud.

“Who are you?,” asked Ribbit.

“Come out, come out now, who ever and where-ever it is that you are,” they both inquired together.

Soon a figure step out, appearing as a small green gnome. Ahead a small red troll appearing character stepped out about the same size. Both were carrying walking sticks.

“These two gnomes are from the groups, Pie and Pix. The Pies are the green gnomes, and the Pix are the red miniature troll looking ones. Once upon a time in the past, the green gnomes and the Pies, ruled over and owned the red ones or the Pix. It’s been nearly two centuries, but there is still much antagonism between these two groups. The Grand Sultan made war against the Pies, forcing them to free the Pix, which they did after much shedding of innocent blood. The Pies then forbade the Pix from entering onto their side of the province and kingdom, banning them by their own self imposed regulations. A hundred years later, the Grand Sultan stepped in and forced the two to merge the halves of the kingdom and province. Even so, there are still bitter rivalries between the two, even to this very day,” explained the rabbit.

“I thought freedom was guaranteed,” stated the boy.

“Well it was,” explained the rabbit.

“I do not understand,” replied TJ.

“The official explanation is that the Grand Sultan moved against the Pies in a great crusade to end their subjugation and domination of the Pix. The Sultan launched a campaign to persuade people to fight on his behalf, so he initiated an information campaign, until he slowly began to get followers to align themselves with his cause.”

“What was the true cause for this war?,” asked TJ.

“All of the people here inside the province are well aware of the real cause, but to publicly announce it would only enrage the Pix and government officials. So much time has now passed that it really does not even matter to most people, at least for the present time it doesn't,” replied Ribbit. “Most folks just want to work, do business, and simply go on with life in general.”

“Tell me what happened. What is the real history of the place here?,” asked TJ.

“Well, it is like this. Back during the day when we won the great war against the world conquering kingdom of chains to the far east, the one across the great dividing pond; citizens here demanded their freedom. Our leaders placed in a set of checks and balances to regulate everything. The understanding in general was, however, that in due course of time, no matter what system was established, the reigning authority would discover a method of usurping their way around it. Almost immediately the system commenced to deteriorate. Within fifty years the first big attack came on our personal freedoms by our own government.”

“What was that?,” asked TJ.

“Consolidation of the banks and the currency, since all localities within the province could have their own banks and issue their own currency. The eastern half of the province resisted this consolidation, continuing to print their own currency, declaring that the demand to consolidate was an attempt to control prices and force the people into servitude directly and indirectly with the banks and the government, since most of the government officials owned the banks in the first place. This resistance enraged the Sultan, of course, who moved to force this consolidation.

“Finally a deep economic depression came about, and the East was prospering immensely due to trade with the other provinces and kingdoms, while the West collapsed. The West claimed they could not compete with people using compulsory labor, since doing so was against the law there. So the Sultan demanded that the East pay a sixty percent tax on their produce and exported goods. The East refused, voting instead among themselves to succeed, forming their own nation supporting their own free individualist interests. Doing so was in perfect compliance with our provincial constitution, but the Sultan invaded militarily anyway by immediately securing the military fortifications throughout the eastern side of the province, and done so very quickly to prevent the East from making military

logistical preparations for future combat.

“Right at first, no one in the West nor any other province would assist in the fight for authoritarian consolidation, so the Grand Sultan changed his approach after about two years into the fight, and one that he was losing dearly. Now, according to the Sultan's information minister, the fight was a great crusade against servitude. The Pix were told they would be allowed twenty hectors of land and a donkey, if they would only assist in the great fight against indentured servitude. On that ground, all of them agreed to fight, since they were so very certain the Grand Sultan and his vast army of knights would stand behind them, to ensure they could act in any manner imaginable, to the detriment of the enemy. All of the Pix conveniently forgot the war would end, and that the Sultan with all of his men, would simply go on back home.

So now just imagine the Pix. Here they are with their protectors, whom they categorized as their liberators, now gone., after they have been looting, burning, stealing, raping, and murdering innocents in complete liberty, now returning back into the very land against which they had once marched. How might you think it was that they were received?”

“I doubt with open arms. I can say that much with a sure certainty,” replied the boy.

“Without a doubt! Soon the Pie came a marching, forming wicked guerrilla bands using terror to seek revenge for the wrongs the Pix committed, and to restore as well as to preserve security. In the end, a great army of ferocious ghosts where called up from within the midst of ancient grave yards, to provide divine retribution for the sins of the Pix against the innocent Pie, soundly defeating them and stomping them down into dust and eternal submission.

“Soon following, a great wall between the Pie and the Pix was constructed, only to be slowly removed more than a hundred years later. Now it is is true here in present times, that the two do exist

together, but only on very precarious terms.”

“But I thought that this was a kingdom endorsing individuality and personal choice, with the freedom to do so,” replied TJ.

“Yes, so do most people everywhere. Truth suggests other additional horrible possibilities, and a fearful future repression.” replied Ribbit.

“Like what?,” asked TJ.

“Back during the days when the wall was coming down, at the same time rules were being put into place, forcing all of the shopkeepers and employees to hand over half of their earnings to the Sultan and his legions. Now the Grand Sultan could do what he wanted to do before the war began, and what he had so seriously desired to do in the years following. Now the people had no choice but to comply with orders. To justify this extortion, some small benefits were offered to the people in the name of giving assistance to those in need. The overwhelming majority of these so called *benefits* went to the Pie, who were a divisive element to be manipulated by the Grand Sultan in the midst of the national body; but enough did go back into the coffers of the Pie, so that some sort of backlash would not result against the extortion. All of this was part in an overwhelming stratagem of new conquest, as any wise observer can readily deduce.

“Twenty years following, the checks and balances on large corporate conglomerates were being dismantled. Now the entire province was managed by large business syndicates, the Grand Sultan, and his thieving legions. The citizen masses were at the complete mercy of these villains masquerading as saints. One clear morning suddenly, a large provincial bank building holding all of the gold from every kingdom on emerald earth, was destroyed by great soaring eagles who had been baited in and trained to carry fire and brimstone by the Grand Sultan himself and his military commandant. This fire was

dropped from the eagle's talons, along with relatively large stones, until it completely destroyed the entire banking structure.

“A few years later, in the false name of preventing future attacks, checks and balances against the Grand Sultan being forced to go through parliament to declare a national emergency, were removed. Watchful eyes were imposed throughout the province on every level to spy on individual citizens, in case they should anticipate any forthcoming negative occurrences and respond to them in the name of true patriotic liberty. So at the present moment, all the Grand Sultan needs to do is simply declare a national emergency, then the people shall lose all constitutional rights, with legions of his black knights being free to lord over them in any manner they deem fit, according to the law of the Shepard, which shall then be the rule. The people will not even have a natural right to dear *life* anymore once this insidious law is in decree. Their only reason for being allowed to live will be to give *complete* service in labor, and body to the ruling Grand Sultan's benefit.”

“You are saying they will be literal slaves to the Grand Sultan, and that specific title of slave will be the one of *all* the people here in the province?,” replied TJ.

“That is right. Such is my prediction for the future of this province. That is also why I have determined to leave it. I am going away into the deep wilderness, I tell you, and go now while it is still possible to get away,” replied Ribbit.

Soon the bushes ahead rustled a bit. Out stepped a green but very pleasant appearing elf gnome. His outward radiance caused TJ to sense he was compassionate and helpful. Even so, the general feeling as well, was one of great caution. In his right hand he held a six foot staff with a metal cap and a three foot chain running from the cap, bearing a spiked ball on the other end.

“And just where is it that you two think that you are going?,” demanded the elf.

“Looking for the hinge,” replied TJ.

“I shall inform you right here and now, that as you go looking for the hinge, you are walking through Pie land here.”

“Oh yeah?,” asked the rabbit. “Where are the signs saying so? I don't see any? Who says so?”

“Who says so?,” snapped the green gnome. “Why, it is I who says so, that's who! Ignorance of rules is no justifiable excuse for breaking them. I could order both of you to go away right now, or have you carried away in chains and shackles.”

“But how are we supposed to know?,” asked TJ. “How are we supposed to know what is against the rules and what is not? This is crazy!”

“Well go ask a rule pigeon,” said the gnome. “He will not charge but half a days wage to speak with him, and all he does is sit on a stool and study the rules. For a substantial fee more, he will go into the Grand Sultans' court and fight for you. If the individual he is fighting pays him more to condemn you, however, then and only then will he turn on you, unless you *up* the ante made against you by your opposition, that is. If you don't up the ante for any reason, then the Grand Sultans' adjunct will have you thrown into the dungeon for a few months, then that will be that; except that there will be an eternal record of your violation, then you cannot vote or own property, or even contest any charges made against you in the future made inside the same category in which you were originally charged. You will not be allowed to have a profession or run a business of any sort, and you will be required to check in with the authorities monthly, as well as be forced to submit unto random searches of one's person and living quarters. Other than that, however, you will be O.K.”

“You're crazy, man!,” said TJ. “There should be posters up around here stating that you and whom ever, own this property and all of this. I don't have the time or the patience to go see that fool of a rule

pigeon, or whatever it is you speak of, let alone the money. All we know is that this road runs long from where-ever right on to where-ever, and at this moment all I know is where I must go that way,” he replied, pointing up the two meandering narrow cobblestone road with his arm extended. “According to what it is that I understand, this hinge is that way, whatever in Hades that is. Come on, there Ribbit,” said TJ as he glanced backward.

“Can I walk with you to the hinge?,” asked the Pie.

“Why should we allow it?,” asked the rabbit.

“Because we are all in search of fortune, just like every being here on emerald earth is. I am in need of it just as much as anyone else. Since you two are headed eastward, then I would presume in the direction of the Grand Sultan. I would also presume where the both of you are in search of fortune as well. I simply wish to assist in our discovery of it.

“Yes, I guess,” said both the rabbit and the boy. “We need all of the help that we can get.”

So the three made their way down the road, where according to the Pie, the hinge was sure to lay. None of them knew exactly what the great hinge was, except that the blue ice castle mansion of the Grand Sultan lay to the left of it. So off they went on down the narrow cobblestone road through the green wood that replaced the open meadows, walking seemingly for days on end until suddenly, a small chest fell before them from the sky at their very feet. All of them glanced upward, seeing nothing but clear blue sky.

“What is this,” cried the Pie?

“I don't know what is that!,” cried the rabbit.

“Well lets just have a look and see,” said TJ, as he bent down to pick the chest up.

He placed the box in his left palm, very carefully opening the lid with his right hand, exposing

another weathered parchment note.

“Wow., it's another message!,” cried the rabbit.

“Yeah I should say, that it looks like another message!,” announced the Pie.

“I will open it and give it a read, so listen,” said TJ, “and the note says...

Dear travelers,

Please stop right here and dig in this very spot. You will soon find a leather bag filled with valuables. When you arrive at the hinge, give this large bag of valuables to the gatekeeper and he will direct you toward the majestic castle of cerulean glaze, and he will inform you of your additional duties, so pay close attention here. To the right, approximately twelve paces, lie a pick ax and a shovel hidden inside the tall grass and bushes. Dig in the exact spot where this box was found for the valuables. Don't try to cheat the gatekeeper; he has put in an order for this bag and knows well of every item in it that is to be found. Good luck to all of you!

The messenger

Owl

Chapter 7

The Nymph's trial

“So., looks like we have our work cut out for us here today,” says TJ, “so now lets look about for the pick and shovel.”

“Twelve paces?,” reply the Pie to the rabbit. “That's one, two, three., hmm now, ten, eleven, it should be right here,” he said, stomping both feet down in an opening there before them in the wood.

“No, it's right here,” said Ribbit, as he stooped to pick up the shovel, “and there lies the pick right beside the shovel maybe nine more steps out.”

The Pie raced up beside him, stooping to grab the pick.

“I guess now, that we can get to work.”

TJ continued to stand where the box was discovered.

“Don't forget to dig where I am standing. The best thing for us to do is to simply take turns digging. You dig first Ribbit, then I will take the pick and let the Pie rest. I will dig and the Pie can take to the pick again, then you may rest, eh? That way we can get there faster without wearing ourselves out.”

“Sounds like a real winner to me,” said the Pie with a smile and an air of sarcasm.

So the Pie and the rabbit race over to where TJ was standing, and commence digging with all of their strength. All of them switched out, the hole going wider and deeper with every scrape of the shovel, until they were all in over their head before anybody knew it. Then suddenly Ribbit hit something with the pick that rang slightly, binding up the pick.

“Here it is! Here it is! I’ve hit something here, fellows!,” he screamed, now digging with his paws.

“Let me see there! Let me see there!,” yelled the Pie as he raced up, pulling upon what appeared to be an aged sheet of leather.

“And boy is this thing really big and heavy!,” they both said as they pulled with all of their might, until the bag released, allowing both of them to fall back all of a sudden.

TJ laughed loudly, racing to where the two lay.

“Wow there, are you both alright?”

“Yeah,” said Ribbit, “ I think we are alright?”

“Let me take a look there,” said TJ, as he walked around toward the opened end of the bag, reaching inside pulling out a nice, single ounce doubloon of pure gold. “Wow,” he said as he reached again into the bag, pulling out one hundred and forty three more solid golden coins. “An ounce of gold is worth over a thousand dollars right now back home, I tell all of you. We are rich, I tell you! Just think what it is we can do on our own with this marvelous find here!”

Ribbit quickly walked up, looking at the shinny golden treasure there as it lay, shaking his head from side to side in silence as he gazed down upon the pile.

“Just remember now, we were instructed to give it over to the gatekeeper there at the hinge. We were also told that he would know if we palmed even a single doubloon of it. You need to make it over to the blue ice castle soon, just to receive the Grand Sultan's blessings ,with even a faint hope of making it back home. Where was it you were from, there boy? From a technical point of view, we among the average folk here in Nymphaion, really have a very limited use for gold here among ourselves, and personally, I will never leave home to live anywhere else, myself. I don't know about the Pie there, but as for myself, I am here to stay. I am well aware that in other kingdoms the truth is otherwise, in regard to the value of gold. Valuable foreign purchasing power is what makes the Grand Sultan so hungry for gold. ”

He raised a doubloon up to his mouth, biting the edge firmly.

“Besides that, what in great Poseidon's name are dollars?”

“ Oh yeah?All of what you say may be true about this place here, but we sure have lots of use for it back in Nottoway, where it is I am from. I could make a fine use of it back in my home town and province, just to be honest about it,” said TJ with a sly smile he appeared to attempt at concealing.

“How do you propose that we carry it all out of here? This stuff is heavy as lead, I tell you,” said Ribbit.

“Well lets divide it into even threes. We could cut the bag up and tie the new bags with strings made from the milkweed fibers growing here and there around here. That way, we could carry it all out, I think?,” said the Pie.

“Sounds like a good one to me,” said TJ, who then pulled out his handy Swiss army knife and began cutting the heavily aged and soiled leather bag into three evenly sized sections, laying them out flatly upon the damp earth before the three of them. The rabbit commenced to divide the coins out, carefully placing the even piles into the center of the sections. The Pie then paused before a small milkweed patch nearby separating the fibers in the stems, carefully rolling them on the thy of his leg with the flat opened palm of his right hand, making some really strong string. These he brought back to the rabbit and TJ, who carefully tied the bags up around the coin piles.

“Well, I’ll cut us all some cane poles and we can place these bags on the ends of them, being careful to carry the poles over our shoulders. These canes will make some fine fishing poles too, should we ever need them,” said TJ.

So he did. He walked way out to a nice patch of cane nearby, being careful to cut three fine nine foot poles of cane, carrying them back to where the bags lay, carefully placing the poles underneath the tightly woven string on the bags. Once these bags were secured onto the ends of the cane poles, they all

made their way out of the freshly dug hole, heading on down the two rut dirt road, traveling deeper into the ever darkening forest depths.

As they walked along for a span of time, soon their ears detected a crackle of dried twigs, their eyes beholding nothing but an empty void of leaves and branches gently waving in the cool day time breeze. All of them froze in hopes of catching a slight move in the area, but their eyes still beheld nothing, save the slightly moving leaves in the gentle breeze and maybe the sudden flight of a song bird or two. Then they heard a voice behind them in an opposite direction from whence the movement came.

“I would suppose that all of you are looking for someone,” boomed a strong feminine voice from behind, startling the entire group. When they abruptly turned, their eyes fell upon the most beautiful bohemian nymph any one of them ever beheld.

“Is there anything I could help you with?,” asked the nymph.

“We’re looking for the hinge,” said TJ, who had now seemingly aged a year, from fifteen into a tall muscular sixteen.

“I can tell you where the hinge is, but you must prove you are worthy of finding it once you are there. Only sophisticated men are allowed to pass through the gatekeeper's gate. You must prove you know enough about the basics of life to pass through and learn of life's more complicated attributes and perilous situations.”

“How must I do that?,” asked TJ to the nymph. “What on sweet planet earth, for crying out loud?”

“First, I superficially deem you worthy of the test right now. So the task for you is to prove you are worthy as a sophisticated man, both on your feet and off, in the light of day as well as on the twelfth-stroke of mid night. If I am not perfectly contented with your appeal, then you are not worthy enough to pass through the gate anyway,” replied the nymph, “and I will just withhold any further

instruction, only to cast all of you outside into the eternal damning void beyond, where you will be most certain to encounter extreme hardship.”

“I still do not understand?,” asked the boy.

“Pause here and allow my talented minstrels to entertain your guests, and please allow me to entertain you as we spend time getting to know one another much better. By tomorrow morning you shall have proven yourself to be ready for any challenge placed before you; or that you are doomed to fail, no matter what it is you go up against, and that you only deserve to simply fade away into nothingness.”

“But the sacred teachings strictly forbid it,” spoke TJ.

“What teachings? The teachings of what land?,” asked the nymph.

“The sacred teachings of my own land, and even those here in Nymphaion Province,” replied TJ with a slight gasp.

“But this is my land here where it is we now stand, and only I say what is to go on in my own land. It is I who deems you worthy superficially at this specific moment, but you are only to prove your worth by first light tomorrow morning. I must warn you right now in deep earnest, that you have only this single chance within the previously stated time frame, to verify your worthiness to endure. So come, follow along, and let us proceed forward in our honest endeavor, in which all truth shall then be revealed, with nowhere left to hide.” said she as she gently raised her palms to grasp both of TJ's slightly trembling hands, coaxing him into a cave entrance concealed inside the bushes ahead, the other two hesitatingly following him inside.

For what felt like hundreds of yards they walked down a long winding dark cave corridor, until the corridor opened up abruptly into an expansive room, appearing more as a natural palace than a room of

stalactites and stalagmites. The room was obviously chiseled by a very talented stone cutter at some point in time, appearing more now as a Pantheon incorporating stalactites and stalagmites into its elaborate design, than merely a natural cave. Slowly all of them walked up the stairway entering the Pantheon, the very spectacle of grandeur before them felt to induce a strange intoxicating haze in the eyes of the three, all in and of itself. The sensation puzzled TJ, who could never determine if the feeling derived from the Pantheon mansion itself or the reflective lighting there inside the palace interior; or from some other unrealized source, such as the strangely delicious but very pungent odor of heavy incense seemingly lingering about within the air throughout the entire Pantheon interior.

Once inside the Pantheon a menagerie of characters were playing games and moving about, some painting portraits and others composing cheerful songs with tall mugs in hand, all of them wishing to invite the two companions of TJ among them, to socialize, sip delightful wine from silver chalice and compose both poetry and musical prose. The nymph requested that TJ follow her as she walked along. In the back room of the Pantheon was a warm man-made cesspool holding crystal clear indigo water. Three blush robed female attendants wearing strands of rose blossoms alternating with white chrysanthemums were pausing before them wearing happy smiles, bearing decorated icicle nectar drinks in both hands extended outward, to assist with taking care of their belongings and encouraging their comfort. Before the pool sat two lounge chairs, with a small table of perfectly unblemished marble between them.

The females attentively separated the two, being careful to crowd around them in order that their clothes may be removed and replaced with a more relaxing robed attire. As he changed his attire, he was instructed by them that these new clothes were functional, both dry or wet, being that the wind passing through would dry them in a matter of minutes. When the women backed off, the two made

their way toward the lounge seats, taking their ease and speaking about the wind, the place they were now in, and TJ's home that he had left so far behind. Every now and then one of them would stand up to dip their right toe into the water, testing it for the perfectly accommodating temperature.

Soon one of the attendants disappeared, then returning bearing a huge chalice of gold filled with smooth but very strong blush wine. In the center of the wine was a flower of beryl lotus, the combination designed to give enhancement to the both wine and the sensual thrill of the moment. Two golden straws were placed into the chalice, so both of them could share in the exhilaration of their time together. Behind them formed a quiet violin serenade born from a delightful band of artistic nomads, as they both paused to speak and peacefully drink from the straws.

Time strangely had no meaning here within this palace. An hour felt as a moment at times, and then as an entire day. The pleasure felt to be intoxicating and continually alluring, seemingly beckoning him to remain therein for all eternity, by causing those hazy thoughts of home to gradually fade away. The two moved from the chairs into the warm cesspool, then back into the chairs. At some time along the way, the robes were forgotten, both being left behind in a casual unorganized pile by the pool side, in absence of any modest hesitation. Soon, but maybe hours later, they both arose from the pool, making their way toward the palace berth chamber.

Once inside TJ was astounded by the elegant canopy bed sitting on legs of brass plated in pure gold. The mattress itself was one of goose down, feeling like a cloud in the berth of heaven itself when one's entertaining body lay upon it. On the other side soon glided the nymph, both of them embracing in ways conjuring raw heaves of passion, feeling as though the general feelings would supersede all others ever felt in their level of enlightened pleasure.

The moment felt as though it would never end, but when it did his eyes opened, now beholding the

enveloping glow of a tangerine sun through a pane-less veil covered window facing the foot of his elegant bed. The general feeling consuming him was a sensation of him longing for the span of time to linger for a perfect infinity. The nymph soon awakening, so it seemed to him, only to warmly embrace him once more again, like the sensation of a cozy gentle breeze passing all over his inviting sweating body.

Time passed as though he only blinked, finding himself now back outside sitting with the nymph in the minstrels chamber, parlaying in the courtyard with his two companions. The two then asking him about his experience, and him replying where it was among the very best he ever had, being anything but even close to bad! As the three began to make their way out, the assistants retrieved their belongings, and the nymph spoke her words of instruction to them all.

“You have certainly passed your test with flying colors. Congratulation in your delightful conquest, and me in mine to keep our perfect rhythm in it's proper timing, just to pat the divine *magistrate* on her right shoulder!

“Keep following the sun in an Eastward direction. Watch your step as you pass. The Grand Sultan's knights have already taken notice that you are here in their midst. Remember the knights are supplied by merchants and tradesmen, who pay handsomely for the knights' sustenance and material supply at years end. This allows the Grand Sultan to save tremendous amounts of revenue, including the twelve percent extra he builds into the yearly amounts for the materials and food supplies charged to the merchants and Tradesmen. The merchants you have already passed through have warned them of your intentions in meeting the Grand Sultan and have perceived your subconscious suggestions of an individual enterprise endeavor. They highly resent those suggestions, since any effort of enterprise on your part, would force them to compete with you, and consequentially in the eventuality, the average

people on the ground around here. Therefore the knights are determined to stop your advance toward the Bastille glaze mansion, out of fear you will appeal your case for permission to engage in individual enterprise here in our kingdom.

“I must give all of you these following warnings. Please watch how you move through the territory from now on. When you get to the hinge, the gatekeeper will speak with you concerning the remainder of your journey. My minstrel assistant will now lead you back out of the corridor, and back onto the road in the right direction. You are always and forever welcome right here in my blessed abode. It is my hope that maybe one day you will choose to return here unto me at some point in the future, remaining in my company for a greater span of time. If you can continue proving yourself worthy of the call, then maybe, just maybe, I will invite you in for an indefinite time span,” she said as she kissed him goodbye with deep passion.

So the four of them made their way back down the corridor, the three soon finding themselves back out onto the road. TJ now felt really energized in a way he had never experienced before. He now knew he could accomplish *anything*, overcoming any obstacle ever placed before him, for some reason he could not explain. Contrary to what he was told, the sensation he actually experienced *was not* one of being negative in the very least, but was one of a *positive* greater than any he ever felt before in his life! He would never forget the name of the nymph for the remainder of his mortal life, since she whispered it so many times into his desperate wanting ears; *Kyria Tisdasos*.

Chapter 8

War with the Sultan's knights

As a precaution, if he felt the need to do so, TJ reasoned their best move would be simply walking to the side of the road some ten to thirty meters out, while always remaining in good cover. This way, if

the knights had a scout on the lookout, which he was sure they did, the scout might overlook them as they walked on passed. All of them were carefully instructed to remain quiet, and any failing to do so caused the others to become extremely irate. After traveling for what felt like several hours, soon out on the road center lay a shinny object catching everyone's eye. When the Pie eased out onto the road for examination, the object turned out to be a large golden, gem-laden crucifix on a silver chain, resembling those worn by the pursuing Knights. Evidently one of them passed through recently, simply dropping it. Most surly this pursuing villain would return to search around for a while, since this charm is very precious to them all.

TJ eased down his rod and the bundle, taking note in his mind of the supplies he picked up as they journeyed about. He was always picking up any item he felt might be of some possible future service to him and the group. He opened the bundle to find a roll of black stove pipe wire he picked up earlier on near the nymph's cave entrance. An idea now suddenly struck him that he could not resist. He instructed the Pie and the rabbit to help him locate a sharp curve in the road, up from the point where the crucifix was discovered. When they found one, Ribbit stood on his shoulders, tying a section of the wire to an oak trunk, at a height estimated to be chest high where a six foot man would sit on a five foot high horse's back. Anywhere from the base of the chest up should work out splendidly, he deduced. If he were a bit too high, that would be perfectly O.K., since the wire technically should always strike a bounding patrol of armored knights directly in the throat or underneath the chin then. By using a two foot section of tree limb, the wire could be tied, then twisted until very taunt, and the looped knots then slid down, secured and virtually locked into proper place, which was what TJ wanted for chief effect in holding the wire at a tight maximum. He did not know for certain if the knights were in the area, but he sure wanted to strike at them first in an offensive move, if they were on patrol attempting to locate him.

Doing so was most necessary, if he was to slow down their advance, launching an effective plan of intimidation with very limited supplies.

What would really be nice is if he could secure some weaponry, such as a longbow or a crossbow and some arrows. Of course, a thirty caliber rifle with armor piercing bullets would be much better, but around here, it was highly unlikely he would ever find such a thing. He would keep his eyes open for one, however. They all passed around the curve where the wire trap was placed in, being ahead in the distance by maybe ninety yards; then suddenly, they heard what sounded like remote thunder, seeing a rising cloud of dust far out into the distance beyond them as they traveled. Carefully and quietly the other two were instructed to crouch low to the ground while what was appearing to be a search platoon passed.

Sure enough when the group passed, instantly it could be determined they were a platoon of well armored knights out on the hunt. When they thundered around the curve, suddenly the sound was one of five hundred tin cans collapsing into a bent up heap directly onto the ground. The three soon doubled back to investigate from the security of good cover. The scene was one of nine knights who had lost their horses, their helmets, and a third of their armor. All of them but two, were in the process of picking themselves up off of the ground. In anger they pulled their remaining armor off, slinging it to the ground in an apparent rage at their frustrating situation. Their heavy swords and lances they tossed, only keeping their precious side knives. All of them paused before their fallen comrades to examine them, but upon seeing there was no help for them, they simply walked on down the road in the opposite direction from where it was TJ and company were headed.

Once the fallen knights were down the road far enough that TJ and the group felt it was safe, they walked out to examine all of the material these knights tossed by the road side. Most of it was heavy

armor and other items of no real use to a traveling group like TJ was a part of. As they continued to look around, they found what appeared to be three machetes with canvas sheaths, belts, and to all of their delight and surprise, a crossbow and a quiver filled with heavy arrow bolts. Evidently the knights intended to return to the area and claim these precious items, but when they did, their luck would be out on them again, if TJ could cause it to be so.

As much of these items that could be carried by the three were gathered up, including several thin swords for a dueling style of combat. TJ even managed to discover a number of new metal files scattered around. These more than likely tumbled from a knight's supply pack. He quickly collected them upon noticing a potential for use later on in the future. He came feel that now he was at war with a real living enemy, playing for keeps. He could only shudder as he came to imagine the horrors all of them had in store, should they ever catch him. He felt like Robin Hood, Sir William Wallace, or another one of his heroes from the past.

As he gazed into the faces of the two armored corpses laying there in the road underneath the taunt wire, he experienced a feeling of raw accomplishment filling his breast with joy and anticipation for the next potential experience. There was a sensation of confidence that came with this spirit of accomplishment as a boost to the general emotion. He smiled broadly as he glared into their frozen light blue faces and glazed eyes. A lump formed upon the sides of both their necks, indicating where the wire had broken them, probably snapping them like a twig, as he had seen deer do when attempting to escape pursuit through a long tall metal fence line. TJ then motioned to the rabbit, saying;

“Get back up here on my shoulders Ribbit, you son of a black eyed Pix, and lets remove that wire before they come back. They will then know that whom ever committed this act returned, but they will also have a sensation of apprehension and hesitation, slowing them down and keeping them from

following us so religiously.”

After they collected up the scattered wares, TJ and his companions ambled back down the road in their former direction, making their way toward the hinge. After they walked for what felt like several more hours, they rounded another sharp curve.

“This appears to be an excellent place for another set up, from what I can tell. I figure that we might be able to make another strike on the same group that was after us before, since I am nearly certain they have turned to pursue us in the opposite direction, which sadly for us, would be the correct direction for finding us.”

Under TJ's guidance, both he and Ribbit walked back down the road for about ninety meters, replacing the tight wire across the road once more again. Pie managed to file the narrow swords down into nine inch pieces, filing a needle sharp point on to one end and a point of lesser degree onto the other. When TJ and Ribbit returned, they took the machetes, cutting four five foot long wooden poles about two inches in diameter. Three feet of these were shaved flat on one side, the shavings carefully picked up and dis-guarded. On the flattened end was fastened one single spike by pushing it through a hole drilled out smaller than the spike, then jamming the other side with a wooden wedge. While Ribbit and TJ prepared these, the Pix began digging one foot by two feet holes maybe two feet deep, in the edge of the woods a couple of yards by the roadside, slightly up from where the wire crossed the road. By the time the holes were dug, TJ and Ribbit were back around helping to set the rigs into their proper place.

Across the ground a long scratch was made with a machete maybe three inches deep and the length of the five foot poles, going from the holes outward. The poles with the spikes were placed into these scratches, with the spikes sticking straight up. The round end of the poles went directly over the

rectangle holes the long way. Once the rigs were snugged into proper place, the scratches were filled in. Dead twigs were placed over the holes and the pole ends. Over these twigs was places leaves and straw from the immediate area in such a way the entire set up was completely concealed. Only two inches or so from the spikes appeared through the leaves and sifted dirt, but the diameters were small enough that these were not visible, unless one was right up on them and very observant. To be quite honest about it, TJ knew well most people were not observant enough to take notice. Once the work was done, all of the fresh dirt hauled away from the site, and the site camouflaged perfectly, appearing as it was prior to putting the set in, the trio continued on in their walk with the remaining articles collected in hand. Now all TJ had on his mind was making it to the blue ice castle and meeting with the Grand Sultan, so he could find his way back home. Even so, in-spite of these semi-hostile conditions, the general feeling was one of great adventure experienced and grand accomplishment achieved .

Soon as details of the trap site were cleaned up, the trio moved on, walking forward for what felt like many tiring kilometers. Soon the woods opened up into a vast mountainous plain, with a broad river running beside the mountain, on which it was they now noticed the narrowing, meandering cobblestone road. On up ahead in the distance along the river, sat a splendid columned palace, with a wall spanning the bank on the other side of the river and on either side of the bridge. In the center of the wall was a stone door, the same width as the bridge toward which the bridge ran directly into. To TJ and the other two, it seemed as if the stone door separated in the center, then drew back into itself. To the right side of the stone door there on the bridge itself, stood a sheltered hutch of carefully stacked flagstone, obviously housing some sort of watchman. The trio then assumed in agreement among themselves, where this might be the infamous gatekeeper who they heard so many dreadful tales of.

It felt as though it took forever to walk the distance from the two rut road's forest exit, out to the

gated door of the bridge and the palace. At long last, they finally found themselves walking across the bridge and over to the stone hutch. The hutch had a window open to the air, and inside that window sat a crude appearing troll hardened by excessive drink, combat duty, and rough living in general. He was dressed in standard soldier's attire for this particular place, that being a kilt, body armor, an iron helmet, a short sword, and a heavy side knife. In the corner of the hut stood a cross bow and a quiver filled with arrows. He looked up at them as they approached with a hard steely gaze, revealing his general lack of trust in people.

“How do ya do sire? We would like to cross, if doing so is possible.” said the rabbit.

“Where is it you are intending to go?,” asked the gatekeeper.

“To the blue ice castle, to see the Grand Sultan,” snapped TJ.

“All of you are aware where doing so shall demand the Grand Sultan's consultation fee, aren't you?,” replied the gatekeeper.

“What is the fee?,” asked the Pie, simply to see what the gatekeeper's reply would be.

“That fee is only forty eight golden rings, per person,” replied the guard, “and that is only to make it through the gate here. I am here to tell you, there are more demands that must be met, if you wish to visit the Grand Sultan.”

“Isn't forty eight golden rings enough?,” snapped the rabbit, “What more is asked of us, for crying out loud here?”

“Just speaking to the Sultan, let alone receiving any measure of his divine gifts and blessings, you must posses a specialized skill he and his illustrious court holds in value. By possessing this skill, you must prove to him and his court beyond all questioning to the contrary, where *all* of you are truly worthy of his extraordinary generosity.”

“My word, man,” snapped the rabbit, “what kind of cooter hooter dolottie is this? What kind of blasted skill is it that this fellow and his cronies so values here, man?”

“Hand me your crossing fees, and then we may speak more about it,” snapped the gatekeeper.

The three then dumped the bags filled with golden coins there on the table before the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper carefully examined the coins with a solid bite, then placing a droplet of mercury on each coin, gently rolling it around on them. He weighed each one in the set of scales there on the table, seeing where the weight was an ounce, smiling back toward them in his approval. Upon completing his examination of the gold, he stepped out of the hutch, walking up to the stone door and pulling on an ancient rolling chain.

“Step right up to the door. Welcome to the palace of dreams. In this blessed place, many great dreams are conceived and astounding wagers made. Since you are wanting to visit the Grand Sultan, you must learn a skill to use in his service, proving where you are of a true value to him, and worthy of remaining in his stay. Since all of you have found the gold, then the skill of treasure finder would be of an immense value to him and his Reginald Court.”

“All of us know how to discover treasure,” said TJ. “We do not need any sort of training. Our proof is the treasure we have already found.”

“Past success or natural talent is simply no longer good enough here, nor even recognized to any degree anymore in the province of Nymphania. One now is in need of an endorsed certification, proving his level of skill is adequate to a standard, and that he was trained by a certified instructor in an officially endorsed establishment of learning. Don't despair, however, your lucky day is here, since this very palace is that endorsed establishment. You need go no farther, my future friends and comrades. So step right up! Behold the face of success as it sees all of you.”

“How long is this process going to take?,” asked TJ.

“Only twenty and eight days,” smiled the gatekeeper, “but a twenty and eight day period of instruction you have no choice but to take, that is, if you wish to experience the wonderful opportunities offered by the Grand Sultan and his most generous court.”

“Do the fees include room and board?,” wisely inquired the rabbit.

“Only your entry fees and the instructional fees. You must pay for your own room and board, I do regret having to inform you. Like I said, however, please do not despair, because today is certainly your lucky day! We have loans we will make to you, payable only when you appear in gracious appeal for service to the Grand Sultan and his most blessed court.”

Finally before the day ended the gatekeeper introduced the trio to the teacher who arrived for work, fresh from the forest woodlands and plowed dirt fields. This ridiculous imp could barely speak in a language perceptible to the three, much less offer them any sort of new knowledge. On the surface at least, he appeared friendly enough, even though being compelled to endure his impish company was much more of an insult to the three than a blessing.

Though they were very bitter about having to go through with it, every one of them managed pulling their time in the palace, learning the valuable skill of treasure hunter. According to the imp, the tools needed were a treasure sniffing goose, and a periwinkle donkey to pack the digging tools in and/or the treasure out, if some was ever discovered. If one only starved the goose long enough, since he had been trained to do so previously, he would pause over a store of diamonds, being gold or gems hidden somewhere long ago deep inside the ground. All of the revealing signs in the behavior of the goose were carefully explained as they relate to hidden treasure. According to the imp's instruction, the proper food to be given in reward was yellow corn and fresh green grass. The fees for the specially trained

goose, the tools of the trade, the donkey, and the yellow corn, were only the same as that which was paid to the gatekeeper initially, being one hundred forty four *rings* of pure gold. If one may recall, a single ring is equal to an ounce of pure gold. A ring of pure gold or a coin in the same ounce and quality, was good for payment.

When the experience completed, the trio now had in their envious possession a goose they were told was specially trained, a purple donkey, a couple of fake leather saddlebags all of them jokingly referred to as *pleather (plastic leather)*, a pick, a shovel, and a twelve pound dirty cloth bag of yellow corn. The imp, who continually smiled the entire time, patted all of them on their backs, barely capable of saying he wished them all well, and best of luck with the Grand Sultan. The trio simply could not believe their own experience, as they continued to walk along the road toward the far east and the sea. They made a pact among themselves not to ever tell anyone of this horrible extortion once they were all back home among family and friends. They also vowed not to speak of it anymore among themselves, from that day forward, in an effort to simply put what happened out of their minds.

For what felt like several days they walked, and during that time they were able to converse with their comrades. TJ out of curiosity asked the Pie, why it was he did not attempt to employ himself as gate keeper or some sort of guard, since it seemed like they were always running into either one or the other. The Pie explained where the only ones allowed that opportunity were those who served the Grand Sultan either in his military, or as his civil servants and tax collectors. Strangely enough, those opportunities, so he claimed, seemed always going to the Pix more than anyone else, who also stood as the divisive manipulative element within the general population's midst. The only logic in this observation was a conclusion where it all originated from the Grand Sultans' *allow first service program* in place to guarantee employment to the Pix at the expense of everyone else, based on a crass

assumption that no-one else ever needed regular pay, like everyone else was somehow indebted to the Pix for some sort of imagined services rendered in the past or the present. For a person even to speak an opinionated word out loud in protest, insulted the sanctioned appeal to emotion, and was most certain to invite the wrath of the Pix themselves or the authorities, as well as to invite misfortune upon himself, such as job lose or suit by court of law.

“But I thought discrimination was illegal,” replied TJ, “is that not what all of you were told for so many years going now?”

“We are told that constantly,” replied the Pie, “but here quite often, events as they actually occur do not match words spoken, and those events may run in direct contrast to the words. Even the word as it is written, often does not match events manifesting on the ground. Remember our blessed constitution?”

“Freedom of enterprise. Freedom from discrimination, and so on,” replied TJ. “I laugh out loud at times, because somehow strangely enough, all of it seems so familiar to me.”

“Well around here, we all get used to it,” replied the Pie. “If the Sultan's agent speaks the claim or if we read it out loud, or if we all hear it being hammered into the heads of the children while at school, or the adults while they are in congregation, then we assume the opposite in expectation of reality. What I observed is that in nine of ten instances, such assumption in the opposite will wind up being reality, especially if the claim is of something very beneficial to all, or positive in general.”

Soon the dismal road they were traveling upon turned into a huge open field of blue lotus and mulberry belladonna rose. In the far distance loomed the sight of a mountain range with the faint sound of the sea crashing behind it. Seemingly directly from them in the barely perceptible distance, the site of a massive castle would suddenly appear on the summit of a distant mountain, then vanish with the

clouds moving to cause the light to shift.

“That is amazing,” spoke TJ. “The way the castle looms in the distance, then vanishes with the shifting of the light, is simply amazing! It is like a work of pure art in and of itself.”

“It has been said among some,” replied the rabbit, “that the castle can virtually disappear. The fact it appears then vanishes is also a part of its unique security system. On most nights it seems to vanish completely. Some times in the glint of a full moon or a flash of lightening, one may get a quick glimpse of it, but such is about all. I highly suspect those within the castle already know of our approach, even though we are way out here in the far beyond.”

“To me the fact all appears to be constructed of pure ice seems to be more a weakness than a strength. I mean, I am well aware that cerulean ice would make an immaculate construction for all of its beauty, but the fact of the ice melting and breaking up into fragments is a serious weakness. How come it doesn't melt?,” asked TJ.

“According to what all of us have been told by those who labored in the distant past once upon a time to construct the castle, the castle sits on a naturally flattened ledge of sorts up there on top of the mountain. The stone of the mountain from above shades the castle and is also of pure crystal in its make. This crystal deflects the rays of the sun, thereby rendering the castle immune to the heat and rays, so the mansion simply sits there in perfect majesty and comfort to its occupants,” replied the Pie. “Isn't that revelation wonderful?”

Soon the three make their way through the huge field of lotus, finding themselves pausing right there before the winding staircase going up to the door of the blue ice mansion. Before the staircase stood one of the Grand Sultan's guards on the ground, wielding a long bolt action rifle fitted with a lengthy sharp bayonet.

“Halt, who goes there?,” demanded the guard.

“We tarnished three are here to see the Grand Sultan,” snapped TJ.

“Let me pull my paperwork here, where the guests are listed whom the Grand Sultan is expecting to see,” replied the guard as he struggled to find the folded list from within his tangled clothing.

“Ah ha! Here it is!,” he yelled in the joy of finding it. He carefully unfolded it, holding it far before himself to read the list.

“What are your names?,” asked the guard.

“My name is TJ. This is Ribbit, the rabbit, and over here is Pie, the gnome,” he said pointing to his right.

“I don't see your names listed!,” he snapped. “Let me call the Grand Sultan.”

The guard lifted his right hand and a falcon soon dropped from the skies to land upon his arm. Into his beak the guard placed a red colored ribbon, the falcon disappeared with it. Within ten minutes the falcon returned, bearing a handwritten note. The guard quickly opened the note.

“The great Sultan asks what it is you want from him, and what service is it you can provide in precedence to that request being fulfilled?,” quoth the guard sternly and without visible emotion.

“I need to know the way back home and what we have to offer is the service of *treasure finder*,” snapped TJ.

The guard proceeds to scribble, folding the note, then handing it back into the beak of the falcon. The falcon flew away, returning with another handwritten note.

“The Grand Sultan says this is all good. You three, may enter into the palace gates.”

“Well wait a minute here,” snapped TJ. “Just how much is required for this instruction, since it is obvious the Sultan wants payment?”

“You'll all freely and unhesitatingly offer forth what-so-ever it is that the Grand Sultan demands for this service you request of him. How dare you even dream where you have a right to demand limitations on the Grand Sultans' desires! Your haughty attitude is a bloody filthy insult to the majesty of the Grand Sultan himself. I shall tell you this much there, boy, if the great Sultan desires a labor of the wind and your pathetic donkey, then you'll even give him that much, and much more as well! I cannot even imagine it, personally, the very thought brings me near to the edge of a putrid vomitorium,” raged the guard as the color of his face changed from a paled gray into a flaring mauve. “Even the very sight and smell of you disgusts me. I entertain absolutely *no thoughts* otherwise what-so-ever, and cannot imagine anyone else ever daring to do so! Even your very presence before me is a filthy insult, right there as you three stand before me! *Retirez vous de moi avant!*,” the guard screamed as they turned and walked away.

Chapter 9

Inside the blue ice castle

The three glared down toward the guard in a sudden streak of anger, but very wisely decided to move up the winding stone stairs toward the drawbridge of the castle sitting so high on the hill summit. All

three of them had taken turns for the entire trip riding the donkey and walking, but still were getting somewhat tired by the time they made it up to the massive drawbridge leading into the castle. As they crossed, they gazed down into a vast bottomless chasm of freezing ice and glowing, apparently inflamed stone, combining both ice and fire in a manner defying all logic. Far down below, the wind howled and moved in ways causing TJ to feel a rigid hurricane force is what kept the ice frozen intact for endless eons. This combination of details did not make sense to TJ, but he did not have time to question what it was he noticed or to ponder the subject. All he had time to do now was focus his gaze directly upon the heavy, wrought iron pull gate looming intimidatingly at the end of the draw bridge, blocking all entrance into the castle foyer.

As he gazed upon the pull gate and through the wrought iron bars, it appeared a fair of some sort was going on inside, complete with a neat vagabond caravan, the dwarfs, the elephants, more multicolored unicorns, with everything else needed to make a fair into a really exciting event. Through the gate bars the three noticed there were tents erected and small crowds moving in and out underneath the tents. Dwarfs were doing acrobatics, performing neat tricks of balance and precision, while beautiful bohemian maidens were engaging in illusory presentations for a wagered fee from the observers, acting as talented readers of opened palms or the crystal ball. Between the gate and the approaching three, the Can Can Girls danced a happy colorful high skirted jig to maintain a lively atmosphere for the pleasure of all present. As the three walked forward the gate slowly arose, until it was high enough for them to enter inside. As they moved underneath the pointed spears making up the gate, moving into the enclosed courtyard garden, a Pix troll dwarf couple approached them.

“How is it that we may help you? Who is it you wish to see?”

“Why, it is the Grand Sultan himself we all wish to see,” they replied in unison.

“Walk this way,” the couple said to the three, “just walk right this way and very soon, and before the Grand Sultan ye three shall most surly be.”

So they walked through the winding castle corridors, taking note of fierce weapon displays on the stone walls in the open rooms. All around the castle, both inside and out, appeared in contrast with the known reality in ways defying all laws of science and logic. In one area was huge room appearing to lack walls at first glance, being filled with tropical plants, large toucan birds, chirping monkeys, and multicolored parakeets speaking in multiple languages, familiar and very unfamiliar. The walls and ceiling were constructed of perfectly translucent ice allowing one to view the sky while on the inside, if he were to step outside he could only see the solid stone and dense tile of the roof. When T.J. inquired from the dwarf for an explanation, the response was that the display stood as a demonstration of the power to be found in sacred natural clear quartz crystal, which bend the suns rays in ways that the health giving properties remained, while the destructive heat and radiation were effectively deflected. A healthful balance was what allowed the room and the tropical environment prosperity, even though settings were contained inside walls of solid ice.

“The apex of wisdom and deduction,” replied the male dwarf troll, “therefore was in knowing exactly how to determine where the point of this perfect balance lay, then being able to apply it in a tangible context.”

Making their way through the tropical garden was a pleasure in itself. On the other side lay another corridor lit by mounted wall torches with dancing eternal flames. When the corridor ended, it opened up into a room appearing as a tropical mountain forest, with a river filled by crocodiles only realized by taking notice of their menacing eyes immediately on the waters surface. There were also multicolored swans of lavender, sapphire, and bright green. Farther down from where they entered, stood a sizable

flock of multicolored flamingo. In the center of the river, above the flock of flamingos, was positioned a small white plank bridge. The three and the dwarf made their way across, into the forest toward the mountains in the background. From the very granite of the mountain was carved the throne of the Grand Sultan, suddenly looming out upon them as they rounded a corner concealed by the wood, startling anyone daring to make the approach, although it was immediately apparent where the Grand Sultan had full veiled view of everything, from the river bridge backward. On each side stood three dozen armored knights wielding pikes, with another three dozen before the Grand Sultan's throne wielding swords and pikes. The very sight was astounding to those whom observed this amazing spectacle for the first time.

The Grand Sultan himself was a huge being, dressed in a fir skin robe of crimson wolf, wearing a pointed hat of the same nature, tipped with an orb of snow otter, with a band of snow fir winding around the hat covering his forehead. Around his waist went a wide leather belt of sable hue, crafted from the mid-night skin of a free roaming bull. His face was concealed by a flowing beard and mustache of flawless snow white so thick that one could even get a faint glimpse of his face. Over his eyes were worn shades darkened into a perfect black, like that of freshly dug coal. The three could never determine if this being was mortal or an immortal, but a general feeling radiating backward to any observer was one of him as an immortal being, in the same fashion as an ancient demigod.

As the three approached, the masses of knights standing before the throne parted, allowing the three to pass inward underneath their raised pikes, soon standing before the throne in humble bequest.

“I heard your call!,” thundered the Grand Sultan. “What then, is your request?”

“I just want to make it back home,” nervously replied TJ.

“Home?,” thundered the Grand Sultan, “where is that, pray tell? Is my kingdom here not home

enough for the likes of you?”

“Well., certainly., I have no problem with this place, except that my family is not here to enjoy it with me,” replied TJ in a trembling voice.

“So where is home for you, then?,” fired the Grand Sultan.

“Home for me is a wonderful place called Nottoway. There lies home for me.”

“Oh?,” thundered the Grand Sultan. “What does home look like? Tell me more about this land of Nottoway.”

“Well, my father lives is a place kind of like this, and I just have to get back! I have been gone way far too long now.”

“Oh?,” roared the Grand Sultan. “ Do you mean your father is an immaculate Sultan, as am I?”

“No,” replied TJ as he stuttered with nervous fear, “he is not a Sultan, he is only a very successful business man.”

“What?,” roared the Sultan again. “You mean to tell me that your father, who is only a simple merchant, is every bit as talented and glorious as am I, eh? That is a dirty insult, I tell you! You mean you came all the way here only to insult me like this, son? I cannot believe it!”

“No, No, No,” replied TJ with a nervous shudder. “I mean my father has done very well for his family, but no, he is not a Sultan by any means.”

“Well, I will provide you the service, but you must pay the required fee for doing so,” roared the Grand Sultan. “Managing a kingdom is way too expensive for a person to offer huge services for free.”

“What is your fee, then?,” asked the three in unison.

“My complete fees are only four hundred, forty four rings of perfect gold, that is all. I need that amount paid in full, please. I will assign you to two of my best guards who will escort you throughout

the grounds around here. You may make use of your new skills you have learned to earn your way. I must warn you, however, that *nothing* comes for free in this world. Every.. hmm now.. three days here, including room and board, will cost you an additional.. one more ring of perfect gold. All of you shall be accommodated well however. I can assure you that much, with all of my personal authority to back it up.”

“I thought you received your service payment from the guard at the bridge?,” asked TJ, in spite of his fear.

“What? Payments that I have received? No payments have been sent to me, I should say,” thundered the Grand Sultan. “I will most certainly have to investigate this claim of my *supposed* payments! You just commence to do your part, and let the past be all passed, and for me to make my personal inquiry into, if you really want to make it back home. Stop complaining and get to work. I want to see what it is you are capable of. Let it be said right here today, where the force of immediate productive employment shall indeed, set all of you free in the end!”

So the three, with TJ now riding the donkey and the goose following behind, along with the two knights as their escort, made their way from the Grand Sultan's throne back out toward the courtyard gardens. Once inside the gardens, the goose was turned loose and allowed to wander across the grass and huge winding tulip beds. Once upon a time, long long ago according to the knight, a building extension was positioned where the gardens are presently standing. The tax collector's station was once very close to the point where they now stand, and the goose walked along casually. Suddenly, she rose her head up and down twelve times in a row, stomping her feet up and down twelve more times. This was the signal for gold, according to the imp of a teacher who trained her and the trio in reading her indications. Indeed, some form of gold was directly underneath the point on which they presently

stood.

The rabbit soon walked up with the pick ax and the shovel, commencing almost immediately with the picking, while the Pie began to dig with all due caution. When the hole was barely one foot down, they suddenly found four golden rings, to their delighted astonishment. The hole was quickly and very neatly covered, then the search began again, but only in the same general area, with TJ making a map of the area and very meticulously notating upon the map specifically where the find occurred.

In making use of this technique, TJ was hoping to reveal potential patterns leading into more future discoveries. In such a manner he could search according to a pattern of possibilities, rather than only at aimless random. He soon uncovered the base for a chimney in the area where the first find was made. The four corner stones uncovered indicated the position of a small shed, which the knight confirmed from old maps he had viewed over a course of the years. Four more solid gold rings were discovered in the area of the chimney where the other corner opposite that of the first find, once stood. When the day ended, both TJ and the team uncovered twelve golden rings. At eighteen hundred hours sharp, the night guard demanded payment for the first days' accommodation, as it would be so from that day forward. Now the amount in hand was eleven golden rings. Come tomorrow, they would need to discover at least twelve more golden rings to be really effective, he reasoned.

After eighteen hundred hours, the peach colored sun began creeping downward behind the distant horizon. Now the time arrived for relaxation and entertainment. In the bath house the trio was given a lavish washing by the delicate bohemian maidens, and new courtroom dress, soon to take their seats back outside in the garden area where the circus performances would commence. Here there would be lots of feasting and boisterous speech, from both the dwarf performers and the trio. Out in the far corners of the gardens, even the donkey and the gifted goose was receiving a thorough combing and a

good bath. The donkey's hooves were properly trimmed and the geese's claws were properly clipped. This celebration with the belly dancers and the acrobatics continued on amid the quaffing of fruited punch until the stroke of midnight, where all would immediately cease for the night.

The maidens would escort the trio into their proper bed chamber for the night. When they awoke, they would all be served the very best in grains, fine corn gruel, and cured meats for breakfast. A quick devotion with alms spoken toward the Supreme Grand Sultan Of The Sky would be offered, in a request for his blessings on their efforts, then the search would continue on for the day. To the trio's surprise, they managed locating twelve more rings, with the knight politely requesting a ring in payment for the accommodation, leaving them with eleven rings more in hand. The total accumulated in hand now coming to twenty and two rings of pure gold. By the close of the seventh day, not only did the trio have a good map of the tropical room as it once was, but they possessed a total of seventy seven rings accumulated. This accomplishment called for a celebration all of its own among the trio, since it appeared where TJ might be able to go home much sooner than anticipated, in lieu of the happy goose's astonishing success.

The court jester bore some unpleasant news on the evening of the seventh day. Since prices of the festival makers, the food, and the gypsy performers increased, the Grand Sultan was now forced to increase the daily rate of accommodation, from one ring of pure gold into that of two golden rings.

"What?," gasped the trio in sudden shock and rage. "You are aware the request originally was for payment by the third day, and we have been dutifully paying by the day, without question."

"What does he think?," suddenly inquired TJ with rage born out of frustration, toward the jester, "that we can just walk out and pluck gold from the ground for infinity? All of us have only been very lucky, I tell you; very calculating, I must admit, but very, very lucky at the same time!"

“Yeah, we have just been very lucky!” replied the rabbit.

“I wish we could make gold,” snapped the Pie. “We would all be for the better then around here, so it seems.”

“I do honestly understand your frustration. I feel where all of them should be much more understanding about the situation. My job is only to deliver the message, not make the rules. I personally would not even waste my time trying to profit from the misery of everyone else,” spoke the jester. “That being said, however, everything is still just as everything is., I am sorry to spell it all out like that.”

The days carried on as usual, except that the daily amount charged for accommodations rose from one ring into two. By the end of the second week, the trio far more than seventy rings accumulated. This brought the in hand total to four hundred and forty rings in only two weeks, in spite of all the excessive accommodation charges. Before the first half of the following morning passed, four more rings were discovered, which now brought the in-hand amounts including the day charges, up to what was needed for covering TJ's trip back home.

TJ met with the other two, all of them taking a deep breath upon completing their assigned duties. The very first thing rabbit done was to feed the goose yellow corn, to his hearts delighted contentment. Above all of them, the goose needed his reward first, since without his services they could have never been so successful. While the goose joyfully plucked scattered yellow corn from the earth, TJ addressed the other two.

“This great day has finally arrived! We are very happy that we have been so successful. At long last we have the assigned amounts to bring into the coffer of the Grand Sultan, who shall then surly see all of us back home. All of you performed nicely and have my greatest applause. I will never forget you

for as long as I shall live.”

“Well, lets all make our way in to see the Grand Sultan before he determines where he needs more money for any future services he is to render,” spoke Ribbit.

“I’ll second that,” replied the Pie.

So the three headed off with the nine pounds of pure gold the Sultan so harshly demanded of them, so that TJ could make the trip back home in safety. Soon, while still under the knight's escort, they made it through the tropical garden and back down the corridor, finding themselves once more standing again in the Sultan's court. Before him and on both sides stood the one hundred, forty four knights, parting immediately before the Sultan, allowing the trio and the knight to walk forward toward the Sultan sitting haughtily upon his massive throne.

“Sire, we have the golden rings in your requested quantities,” spoke TJ, as he held the straw hat and a small pail filled with them up high enough for the Sultan to observe. The knight quickly seized them, bringing them before the Sultan, bowing on one knee before him in humble presentation.

“Very well done,” spoke the Sultan, “but I question your honesty in this endeavor. How did average mortals manage to discover pure gold so quickly?”

“We had the tools and the training,” spoke the Pie.

“And we had the gifted goose,” replied the rabbit.

“The goose?,” roared the Sultan. “You mean that you had a goose who could find this gold in such astonishing quantities? Why, I demand that the goose appear immediately before my court for inquiry!”

“Please sire, do not bother the goose,” pleaded TJ, “he did no harm whatsoever, but only had the interest of his comrades in mind before those of his own.”

“I demand that the goose appear before my court immediately!,” screamed the Grand Sultan as he

slammed both fists down upon the arms of his throne. “Guards, fetch me that golden goose, or I shall order the heads removed from the ones of your ranking in high command first!,” roared the Grand Sultan. “I shall have all of you drawn and quartered, if any one of you should fail to satisfy my ambitions and requests!”

“Please,” pleaded TJ., don't bother the goose. He has done no harm in this sad tale of bitter frustration, tears, and woe.”

“All of you standing there before me, cease in your disgusting quibble! I am the Grand Sultan lord of province Nymphaion, and I shall do as I Jim- Do-Dolly please! No mortal anywhere shall ever demand that I do anything otherwise! I could order that you be seized up in chains, and thrown into the dungeon, where you would be most certain to suffer dreadfully at the hands of the impish troll Allabites and the violent, blood thirsty, Sodomites. Cease now in your pleading quibble before me, or else suffer the horrible consequences of doing otherwise!”

High up near the ceiling, in complete silence soared the divine goose, swooping down from nowhere upon the Grand Sultan, beating him ferociously with both wings and pulling violently at his hat, his beard and the dark shades, then throwing them all upon the floor of the castle as he flew away. The clothed, seemingly headless torso of the Sultan then arose, as if to attempt at walking away, then collapsed upon the floor in an abrupt instant, tumbling down from the throne into an unorganized heap upon the natural stone floor beside the colossal throne. Everyone there inside the chamber made such a great gasp born out of a sheer astonishment at the pathetic spectacle laying before them on the natural flat stone, that it was heard throughout the entire mansion estate.

Chapter 10

Home again in Nottoway

Immediately the trio followed the goose as he flew through the corridors back out toward the garden where the gypsies sat underneath their tents in relaxing contemplation. The goose quickly seized up one

of the smaller canvases, flying off toward the overhanging mountain sides with it held tightly in his bill. The rabbit, the Pie, and TJ seized up all of the others they could carry along with them in their hands, racing in toward where the goose had flown. As they made their way toward the crystal stones in the heights, they could gaze downward, taking note of the knights as they scrambled about in a strange sort of orderly disorganization, apparently in great search for them, but obviously not in possession of a presumed protocol to address the present emergency. The scene from above appeared to be one of total pandemonium among all of the mansion guests.

Across the crystal quartz, the goose had spread one of the huge tent canvas sheets, carefully weighting it back down on the translucent stone with small granite stone boulders. The Pie assisted him in placing heavier stones for more security to the canvas. The width and length of the canvas was enough to cover a huge section of the crystal. Now the rabbit and the Pix spread their sheets into a like wise fashion, covering the crystal stone of quartz. The outward pressure of the wind rifling through the ravine caused the canvas to lay plastered flatly upon the crystal stone, as though it was ironed into it's proper status. The amount of canvas was almost enough to completely cover the entire expanse of quartz, but each of them well knew that he *must* make it back down into courtyard, if he was to secure enough canvas to see the job through.

Once they made it back into the courtyard and cave like corridors of the colossal ice mansion, huge droplets of water fell like a heavy rain covered the entire earth. In the distance a sound of ice crashing down into a splash, shocked the relaxing sound of the falling rain. The knights, so it seemed, rather than continue in their pursuit of the trio, fled the area upon discovering their new freedom from the repressive spell of the dominating Grand Sultan. In the distance the loom of cathedral bells ringing in their newly discovered elation, covered the area of the entire province, the sound of which was even

detected by those in the neighboring provinces.

TJ called the goose back into the castle on a sudden whim. Before he left for good he had one more personal task to complete, he reasoned from amid the confusion observed. He placed the goose back onto the ground, coaxing him to discover three more rings of gold, only to take them back home with him as a prize to forever remind himself of this greatest adventure experience, and to profit a small bit from property investment that he reasoned he could grow into a fortune with the addition of some time.

Suddenly after walking only three dozen yards, the goose bobbed his head up and down and began to pace his feet up and down in place, immediately passed the marble bust of *Plutus The Wolf* sitting above the immense door-less archway opening into the Sultan's court and vast chamber area. On the inside of the room ice collapsed in continuous fragments and chunks, along with the rain as it melted underneath a now glowing radiant sun of immaculate rose'. As TJ stepped underneath the marble bust, it suddenly dislodged from the melting of the ice securing it, tumbling down in an instant, only to nick TJ in the left temple side of his head, causing him to fall backward unconsciously upon what felt like was the cold porcelain tile floor of the majestic mansion Bastille.

When he opened his eyes he was back in the garden by the willow enshrouded pond in Nottoway, underneath the arbor laying face up on the ground in-front of the concrete bench; his family and the medics looming over him, the red and blue lights flashing brilliantly in the foreground, the shadows of the dying sun looming behind tree limbs seeming to reach down and grab at him, like hands of hungry demons. Directly above his astounded stare he gazed into the face of his father, clenched in what appeared to be anger, his mother frowning near to tears in an apparent heart wrenching disappointment and disapproval.

“How many times have we told you son, stay away from drugs and all of those wastrels indulging in

it! Do you know how long it was you have lain out here today? Are you aware of the possible danger you exposed yourself to? Your dear mother and I were worried sick about you, for crying out loud! We did not have even an idea as to where it was you might have been! Do you know that? Have you paused to consider anyone here but yourself? I moved from Goose-lick to get you away from that loser crowd there, and into a higher class of life here in Nottoway, and it really is a shameful, pathetic disgrace, that all you could find to associate with was only a higher class of loser, son!”

“But Dad, you will not believe it! You will not believe my story, even if I was to tell it to you, and introduce the cast of happy characters so involved. You will not *believe* what it was I did and where it is I have been to,” moaned TJ as he moved his aching, intensely throbbing head from side to bruised side.

“Ribbit, Pie, and the gifted goose, wherefore art thou now in my moment of extreme need? Please, help me to tell them all about us, the delightful bohemian maiden in her cave palace, and our merry adventures in kinder-land!”

He then sighed deeply, repeating over and over again in a meaningless rant, until he gradually faded off to sleep.

“Just where oh where has my poor honky donkey wondered off to now? The wicked, despotic Shylock of a Sultan has died, I tell you all! Let the happy bells of liberty ring for all infinity, the divine gilded goose is with us elves and the evil Sultan is gone forever more! Salutations and cheers to a glorious Elysium future right here in our home land once more again! Dance and merry make for all time ever more, for at long last we are free, I tell you all!

“Behold, my chains are really gone, so now the entire world may see that time has truly come for mine to just be me. So party on with the long shaft and the drinking cup, right on up until the very

break of dawn. Damn the all of you for being the vain villains that you are! If I cannot be there in body, then I will most certainly be there among you in spirit, and with the best of spirits I shall tell you all; so damn the lot of ye for being the arse slathering knaves that all of ye most certainly are to be! I only choose to be the me that is rightfully mine, and any who determines not to accept it can just step kindly aside, and directly into the raging flames of Hades with the lot of ye, I say!”

